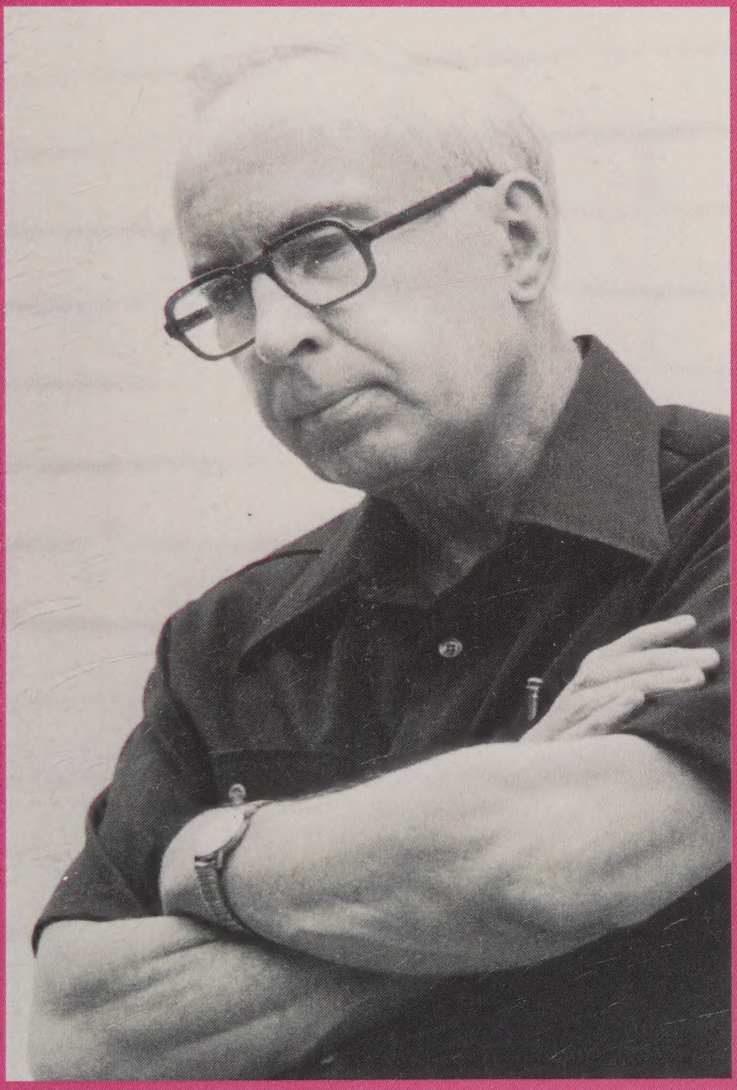
CONTINUING CHESTERTON

The Passage and Revelation of Canada's Renaissance Roots in People's Poetry



TERRY BARKER

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CONTINUING CHESTERTON

People's Poetry's Passage and the Revelation of Canada's Renaissance Roots

By Terry Barker

For the members and friends of
The Susan Chakraverty Institute
(New College, University of Toronto),
and the Oxford George Grant Society

"that posterity may know we have not loosely through silence permitted things to pass away as in a dream"
- Richard Hooker, (*Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity,* Preface, I.I 1593)

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In memory of my mother,
Mary Elisabeth Anderson
(1915-2009)

PREFACE

In my two previous collections of essays, reviews and short writings, *After Acorn* (1999), and *Beyond Bethune* (2006), I suggest that poet Milton Acorn and his "People's Poetry" admirers offer an affirmation of modernity that constitutes, in fact, a profound criticism. In this sequel, I believe, I elaborate upon the nature of this criticism, and its importance for the successful addressing of contemporary problems.

Underlying the argument of the following pieces is my conviction (held only vaguely when I first encountered Acorn and his circle in the early 1970s) that the Movement for which he was the focus had the potential for recovering the life of the Spirit, so badly distorted by the ideological systems put in place during the Enlightenment, and its sequels. As "People's Poetry", (as what political philosopher Eric Voegelin calleda "secondary ideology"), is now experiencing disintegration itself, the various forms of spirituality at its root are becoming manifest.

Behind my hope was the work of C.S. Lewis, who, as early as 1933 (in his *A Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*) outlined an immanent critique of modernity which explained how the life of faith, thought and the productive imagination could be salvaged from the intellectual wreckage of the ideological blocs, then about to engage in global war. Lewis' chief inspirer in this respect was a poet and public thinker of an earlier period of the modern era, G.K. Chesterton, the *eminence grise* of the Georgian Poets, who had addressed (in journalistic essays, book-length scholarly studies, and popular fiction, as well as poetry), the problematic inherited by modern Western society from the late Middle Ages.

In his own day, Chesterton (as a journalist, especially) was often treated by publicists as a "reactionary", and this attitude

has continued among those who think in ideological clichés, such as the late Christopher Hitchens, who expressed this view at length in his final review/essay for *The Atlantic* magazine. Failure to recognize a public philosopher by a representative of a current opinion-forming class is a problem as old as ancient Athens, of course, and by all accounts Hitchens made a genuine effort to come to terms with Chesterton's self-described "sociology" on relatively short notice (in fact, almost on his deathbed). However, it is still somewhat surprising that, when Chesterton's actual political views (he was a British Liberal), and those of persons he directly influenced (e.g., Austrian socialist, and early critic of Nazism, the Jewish-born Aurel Kolnai), are public knowledge, the old chestnuts from the 1930s about Chesterton's anti-Semitism and sympathy for Nazi/Fascism are still repeated in prominent American journals (accompanied by a very unflattering picture of the subject of the essay).This seems to me to fit the Oxford English Dictionary definition of "reactionary" behavior; i.e., "retrograde tendency especially in politics."

In an earlier avatar, Hitchens himself had been critical, as a Trotskyist (International Socialists), of the "reactionary" attitudes of the mainstream "bourgeois press", with its endlessly repeated canards. What might be called "the alternative Establishment" (of various persuasions) has in general been kinder to Chesterton, with Roman Catholics being the most obvious defenders of his theological and social opinions (which were actually largely a product of his earlier years as an Anglican), and the (in Elizabeth Gould Davis' phrase) "cognitive minority" (called by their detractors the "lunatic fringe") utilizing Chesterton's fictional and poetic writing as J.R.R. Tolkien's was later (Orwell was a participant here, as Hitchens evidently understood).

Colin Wilson, for example, the brilliant young author of the 1956 analysis of the temper of modernity, *The Outsider*,

counted as an early inspiration Chesterton's poetry (the only thing of Chesterton's that Hitchens liked). Indeed, the first chapter of one of Wilson's less well-known books (from mid-career), *Poetry and Mysticism* (1970), is entitled "Absurd Good News", an expression Chesterton used to describe the "peak experience" that Wilson seeks to understand in this book in poets and poetry (and particularly in the work of Nikos Kazantzakis), and in his later books in the occult and supernatural.

Wilson starts in 1956 at the position Hitchens appeared to have reached at the end of his life; that is, with a kind of confused Existentialism on a basis of belief in the emergent evolution of consciousness. Wilson retains the latter conviction, and, through many volumes, proceeds to try to ground it on Husserlian Phenomenology, Gurdjieff's techniques for awakening human potential, and finally (in what Voegelin would perhaps have called an "incomplete breakthrough"), inshamanistic experience of external "spirits" independent of the material world, associated with an antediluvian Cyprus, his preferred location for Atlantis. In other words, Wilson barely discovers "the differentiation of consciousness" (to use another Voegelinian phrase), the basis for Classic philosophy, and any of the great religions.

In the following, I hope to show that the Canadian People's Poetry tradition, on the analogy of Colin Wilson and the poets and poetry he discusses in *Poetry and Mysticism*, has been engaging in a complex process of "the search of the Ground" (as Voegelin might have called it) in the context of the contemporary cultural chaos, using a methodology that reverts (at several removes) to Chesterton.

February 12, 2014
(the day after the commemoration of Caedmon)

PROLOGUE

In the summer of 1953, after a year in Gravenhurst, Ontario, I moved with my mother, who had married a fellow British post-war immigrant, to Toronto's west end. I was relatively happy in my new surroundings, but had a general unease about school life, and my apparent inability to "fit in". This feeling was addressed when, during a class visit to the local public library, I discovered Desmond Leslie and George Adamski's *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, a theosophic treatment of the current craze for UFOs,which provided, with the follow-up reading I did in related books, particularly the *Lost Continent of Mu*series of James Churchward, a metaphysic to explain my estrangement.

By the time we moved from the area in 1957, I had a trial subscription to the *Rosicrucian Digest*and had located (although not yet attended) the meeting hall of the Toronto Theosophical Society downtown.

Over the next few years, I understood myself as an "esotericist" and "cosmic catastrophist" (picking up this term from Immanuel Velikovsky's *Worlds in Collision),* and at the geology group I attended at the Royal Ontario Museum, and at high school, I expressed the scepticism I had learned from my unorthodox reading for the Darwinian theory of evolution, the notion of past Ice Ages, and for Uniformitarianism in general.

In 1958, I began a Bible study with a representative of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose apocalyptic-Gnostic version of Christianity seemed, at least at first, to provide a full-blown religious philosophy to serve as a basis for my growing conviction of the veracity of an "alternative reality" (as I later called it) to the one presented by conventional authorities, and after finishing school, I embarked upon a career as a full-

time Jehovah's Witness "pioneer " minister in suburban Toronto, conducting Bible studies, giving public talks, and teaching door-to-door canvassing techniques myself.

Unlike most Witnesses, who confined their diet of reading to the contemporary Watchtower Society official publications, in which the "new truths" discovered by the "governing body" appeared, I continued to read widely in search of material supportive of my Witness world-view, and to (I thought, not unreasonably) equip myself to "witness" to the wide variety of religious and secular points of view I encountered in my door-to-door public ministry. This policy included borrowing books from my "calls"(when offered), and among the items I read (about1966) was G.K. Chesterton's *St. Thomas Aquinas* (first published in 1933), lent to me by a Roman Catholic man from Goa whom I had been calling on in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough. I was greatly impressed by Chesterton's clarity of expression and generally "upbeat" tone, but my conversations with the Goan did not continue, and when my difficulties with Witness theory and practice arose and intensified over the next five years, eventually leading to my leaving the "New World Society" in 1972, it was influences from the Protestant Reformation and New Left politics that acted as the catalyst in my gradual "unpicking" of the Witness scheme.

I never quite forgot Chesterton's masterful discussion of Aquinas' complex philosophical problem of dealing with Augustinian Neo-Platonism on the one hand and Latin Averroism on the other in the context of his construction of a proper Christian philosophy against the background of the introduction of Aristotle in the medieval

Western Church, and when I met the work of the Chesterton-influenced Anglican C.S. Lewis (initially in Lewis' most apocalyptic writing, *That Hideous Strength*), in

1973, I sensed a similar "upbeat" atmosphere, clarity of expression, and range of existential spiritual experience to those which I had encountered in Chesterton's account of Aquinas. This rather belated (on my part) discovery of the world of Christian philosophy led (via Stephen Neill's historical treatment of the development of the Anglican Communion in his *Anglicanism*, 1960) to my delayed Confirmation in 1976.

Although nominally Broad Church Anglicans themselves, my mother and step- father had been very intermittent church-goers during my childhood in west Toronto, but they had told me they thought I should be confirmed at the age of twelve (in 1955). I had refused at the time, pointing out that I knew very little about Christianity, or any other religion for that matter, and declaring my determination to "find out for myself" by "visiting various churches". Although this plan was never followed in any programmatic way, the peregrinations of the next twenty years, partly described above, certainly put me in touch with many varieties of Christianity and quasi-Christianity, equipping me to make up my mind in a reasonably informed way by my early thirties. Furthermore, while I did not find in Canadian Anglicanism the sort of Christian intellectual life I might have liked, the worst excesses of 1960s Existentialist-inspired " theology" seemed to have passed the Canadian Anglicanchurch by, and notable individuals (D.R.G. Owen in his *Scientism, Man, and Religion*, 1952, and George Parkin Grant in his many works of the 1960s,'70s, and '80s, for example), had made major contributions to Canadian Christian social and political critique.

The "second coming" of Existentialism (as "Post-Modernism") in the 1980s and 1990s, and into the new century, has caught the Anglican Church of Canada

unprepared, however, for this new wave of anti-philosophy is allied with contemporary manifestations of the dominant liberal ideology (Feminism, the Gay Pride Movement, the politics of "Diversity", etc.) rather than being an overtly theological trend, such as the "Death of God" theology of the 1960s. Accordingly, the relatively weak culture of Reason in the Anglican Church of Canada, built as it had been very largely from the Evangelical (adherence to Scripture) and High Church (adherence to Tradition) wings of Anglicanism, has crumbled under the onslaught of its surrounding liberal milieu. This process of spiritual erosion has become so severe that the Anglican Church of Canada now stands in danger of being out of communion totally with the broader international Anglican fellowship of churches (with the exception of the already severely deracinated Episcopal Church of the United States of America), and seems to be in fairly complete ecclesiastical and philosophical disarray.

The critiques of modernity of Owen, drawn from the Neo-Protestantism of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, and of Grant, reverting to the Neo-Platonism of Simone Weil and Leo Strauss, grew out of Anglican Romanticism, a fading force in Canada in the twentieth century. Both in the older Roman Catholic field in the country and among literary heirs of the British "Georgian" poets of the early years of the last century, such as Milton Acorn, the "People's Poet", however, something of the aroma of this tradition remained (and remains in isolated parts of the former Dominion). These "fragments of a faith forgotten", as they might be called, in English-speaking Canada are fundamentally Chestertonian in origin, which is to say they are "Broad Church believer" in essential character, offering a satisfactory philosophical response, if developed, to the apocalyptic-Gnostic experience that constitutes modernity and its post-modern fag-end. For

Chesterton, not Thomas Hardy, as some believe, was the *eminence grise* of the Georgians, and his (in effect) poetic "immanent critique" of Whitman influenced the first generation of modernist Canadian poets and their heirs, who became the "greats" of twentieth-century People's Poetry: Acorn, Al Purdy, and Raymond Souster.

As I was to learn years later, both Ray Souster and Milton Acorn's eventual wife, Gwendolyn MacEwen, lived in my general neighbourhood of west Toronto during my childhood there. Wilson MacDonald, the last fully Romantic Canadian poet, who was greatly influential upon Souster as a student, visited my school when I was in Grade Eight, and Gwendolyn MacEwen was apparently borrowing books on esotericism from the same local libraries I was patronizing. In school, our Readers still contained the work of the greatest of the Confederation Poets, Archibald Lampman, so formative for Acorn, and of Populist poets such as Edgar Lee Masters and their Canadian counterparts, Raymond Knister and Dorothy Livesay. The "Song Fishermen" school (Charles Bruce) was represented, as were the Georgians Chesterton, D.H. Lawrence, and (significant for Souster) W.W. Gibson ("Flannan Isle"). It was at this point, too, that I tried writing "epic poetry" myself, an idea suggested to me, I think, by reading the theosophically-influenced translations of the *Ramayana* that the "saucerer Royal" (Desmond Leslie's nickname) used in *Flying Saucers Have Landed.*

By about 1963, although the poetic centre ofEnglish-speaking Canada had shifted from Montreal to Toronto, the Chestertonian substrate of Canadian People's Poetry had been forgotten, buried under new waves of American poetry and political ideas. This was part of the loss of that "olderCanada" that George Grant lamented in his famous 1965 jeremiad, *Lament For a Nation:The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism.*

Its meditative recovery certainly will not bring back the country that has been lost, but may yet revivify the Church that, as Stephen Neill pointed out in 1960, has "failed to rise to the height of its opportunities" (*Anglicanism,* p. 302).

CHAPTER 1
PEOPLE'S POETRY REVIVED OR REVISED?

I

A Report on the Second "Controversy of Poets" held at Grossman's Tavern, Toronto, September 14, 2005
Since the *de facto* collapse in confusion of the People's Poetry Movement in Canada in 2003-2004, two attempts to revive its spirit have emerged. One, rooted largely in the Atlantic Region, has been an effort to rebuild the Canadian Poetry Association on the basis of its original inspiration in the poetry and social vision (or visions) of Milton Acorn, Dorothy Livesay, and their friends. The other, less self-consciously, has been centred among the membership of the Toronto Chapter of the CPA (renamed the Renaissance Conspiracy), where the workshopping and circulation of members' own work-in-progress, has captured existentially something of the freshness and immediate relevance of People's Poetry's legacy.

This second "controversy of poets" (the first was held in Hamilton, Ontario, in June, 2002), offered the first real opportunity for these two perspectives on the future of People's Poetry to meet and dialogue. While the meeting certainly took place, the tone of the panel discussion which followed the poetry readings and presentation of papers confirmed the truism that the elements in the original ideological "cement" that held the Movement together in its formative years (socialism, left liberalism, nationalism, feminism etc.) have largely disintegrated, leaving little to

debate but the personal details of past ideological squabbles.

What has remained of the ethos of the liberal nationalist populism that spawned the various "People's" movements of the early nineteenth century are its fierce individuality, and its spirituality (to use the currently-popular word), and both of these were very evident in the offerings of the participants in the controversy at Grossman's.

James Deahl, (the organizer and M.C. of the event), Allan Briesmaster, and Robert Sward opened the afternoon's proceedings for the dozen or so poets and poetry enthusiasts present with short readings of their work illustrating their roots in, or links with, People's Poetry. Deahl's selection from his Hamilton, Ontario-based corpus of work, and a poem written as a tribute to a Tang Dynasty Chinese poet, Briesmaster's highly sensitive cameos of the human experience of time, the phases of Nature, and his critique of the hubristic aspects of the Space Program, and Sward's wryly humourous reflections upon the spiritual depth of ordinary experience often overlooked by those searching for meaning in their lives, were all fitting *entrées*.

The three papers presented (by Steven Michael Berzensky, Joan Latchford and Allan Briesmaster) each exhibited various aspects of this bedrock individuality, and concern with matters spiritual, typical of populism's Early Modern roots. Berzensky gave his audience a detailed personal history of the evolution of his poetic consciousness in the context of the "Greats" of Canadian People's Poetry, and a justification for his affirmation that "poetry is eternal; (it) connects soul to soul", Latchford in the spirit of the combativeness of the Movement's founders, turned its sharp critique of social exclusion, academic pretension, and pomposity, upon itself, arguing that today "People's" needs to be understood as universally human, and Allan Briesmaster concluded the set

by presenting both a criticism and an affirmation of the "spherical" model of human interaction and organization that People's Poetry has traditionally supported (in contradistinction to the "pyramidal" model of life and art that has usually obtained throughout history).

As previously suggested, in the panel discussion that followed the formal presentations, the individuality (or, perhaps, even eccentricity) of the particular points of view expressed seemed to come to the fore, leaving the general impression that People's Poetry in Canada is not so much in the process of being revived as being revised.

II

Ted Plantos, who died in 2001, was, as I have suggested in *Beyond Bethune*, the pivotal Toronto People's Poet of the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this respect , he was the successor of Raymond Souster , a much more famous name, and a poet who was still writing and publishing to some critical acclaim in his early nineties.

Ted's work, although still developing at the time of his relatively early demise, expressed a very wide range of human material and spiritual experience, drawing from his readings in military and political history, Romantic and Post-Romantic poetry, esoteric Ufology, and , of course, his predecessor and mentor People's Poets, particularly Milton Acorn and Al Purdy. A self-described "Christian mystic", Ted wrote of the rough Cabbagetown world of his youth, the bloody battlefields of the First World War, and the urban banalities of modern daily life in a way which revealed their hidden beauties, turning a crass working-class bar, or a dismal doughnut shop, for example, into a cathedral of spiritual substantiality, without the slightest hint of sentimental slop,

or literary self-consciousness.

Can People's Poetry be revived? Can it be revised? These questions were raised at the Second Controversy of Poets held in Toronto in 2005. Ted, the mystic, wasn't there to address them, so perhaps we can in the spirit of the Plantosic prosody.

In my view, the Plantosic prosody tells us that People's Poetry can be revived, but only if it is revised, and revised in a particular way. Furthermore, Ted's work exemplifies, in its clarity and practicality, the foundational step in the process of the recovery and advance of the populist Muse: the discovery in ordinary human experience of the truly transcendent, and the rejection of the pseudo-philosophical explanatory scheme, no matter how intriguing and seductive the latter may initially seem. It is this intuition that allowed Ted to write both poetry and prose in the vein of Hugh Garner's *Cabbagetown* and Juan Butler's less well-known and even grittier *Cabbagetown Diary: A Documentary*, with its reflections upon the influence of the ideological illusions of the 1960s, and develop this into a discourse expressing genuine mystical experience, as in his poems "Dante on the Lawn" and "Up All Night With Beaudelaire", or in the story "Ragtown", for example. Like the British Christian Mystic poet and novelist and developer of the " image of the city" (in his case, London), Charles Williams, Ted Plantos retains the scaffolding of Gnostic Romanticism at the root of the modern literary mind, but unveils the edifice of spiritual reality standing behind it.

As early as 1913, Evelyn Underhill, an accomplished mystic poet herself, pointed out in her study *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins* that the regenerative "mystery religions" of the Classical world were "magical dramas" describing the means to a "temporary change in consciousness" by which the practitioner could escape "from the tyranny and unreality of the Here-and-Now."

In later Classical times, after the advent of Platonic philosophy, (a mystical realism), and the spread of international empires, the cultural remnants of these "mysteries" mixed, forming the basis for the Gnostic Sects that have come down to us today (the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, the Kabbalists etc.), existing around the edges of Christianity, Judaism and Islam and becoming socially effective as "revitalization ideologies" during times of political disorder (G.W.F. Hegel, John Stuart Mill, and Adolf Hitler were all conscious admirers of various forms of Gnosticism, for example).

Indeed, it was another modern admirer of Gnosticism (in his case, of the same strand of the tradition that had inspired Madame Blavatsky and G.I.Gurdjieff, Islamic Ismaili esotericism), Friedrich Nietzsche, who clearly, in effect, identified the central philosophical conflict in the contemporary world as being between Gnosticism on the one hand, and mystical realism (in the form of Platonism and Christianity) on the other (as indicated by his shrewd observation that Christianity is "Platonism for the people", for example).

As a poet of modernity, Ted Plantos inevitably built a Gnostic thought-world and engaged in the Gnostic psycho-drama, for, as philosopher Eric Vogelin has shown "modernity is the growth of gnosticism." His personal construction in this regard was fleshed out by his readings in Ufology ("flying saucers") and "ancient astronaut" literature, the "Earth Chronicles" series (and companion books) of Zecharia Sitchin being of special interest to Ted. As Sitchin's writing is the most historically scholarly and linguistically sophisticated of this genre, it held Ted more strongly than the Theosophical speculations behind the earlier UFO literature, and it also made evident the roots of the Gnostic dream-world

in pre- or sub-philosophical, and sub-Christian metastatic faith (magic), prophetology, and apocalypticism, to use the typology of Voegelin and the scholar of apocalyptic, Christopher Rowland.

Interestingly, Sitchin's final book in the "Earth Chronicles" series, *The End of Days: Armageddon and Prophecies of the Return*, published after Ted's death, shows this intellectual trajectory (from magic to Gnostic pseudo-social science or scientism) clearly.

However, Ted was also strongly held by a practical and spiritual realism, and, in the final analysis, this triumphed over his version of the Gnostic "Second Reality" (as Voegelin calls the phenomenon). The details of this struggle are outlined in his work, of course, especially in his volume of selected poetry, *Daybreak's Long Waking* (1997), where the "fierce ideal" (to quote Ted quoting Beaudelaire) of Gnosis is juxtaposed with "Dante (Alighieri)" who "speaks and leads me through an eternal space" following (as Charles Williams does in *The Figure of Beatrice*) a vision of the Good in human beauty to which he has been "angelically tuned" by Pistis (faith), and "right reason".

Bibliographical note: Ted's interest in UFOs and the "ancient astronaut" tradition was stimulated by the studies of his poet friend Cliff Kennedy. The latter's work on the subject (which he published under the *nom de plume* of Christopher Gray) is entitled *The Rape of Earth* (Scarborough, Ontario/Glace Bay, Nova Scotia: Drift Aweigh Press, 2000), and it is dedicated to Ted.

A paper given to the Purdy Country Literary Festival symposium on Ted Plantos, Marmora, Ontario, July 31, 2010.

III

FROM THE VOICE OF THE LAND TO THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE: AL PURDY: SKEPTICAL PEOPLE'S POET (given to the Purdy Country Literary Festival symposium on Al Purdy 2008)

In three succinct paragraphs in his classic Marxist-Leninist popular history, *A People's History of England*, published originally in 1938, A.L. Morton summarizes the facts of the foundation of Canada as understood from a historical materialist perspective as follows :

"The character of the development of…Canada…has been determined mainly by [its] geographical situation and features. Canada can hardly be said to exist at all as a geographical entity. It is a northward extension of the U.S.A ., a fringe of fertile land sharing the qualities of the United States territory to the south ofit , and shading off gradually into the cold Arctic wastes. With one exception, all its natural outlets are to the south towards the U.S.A., rather than east or west, towards the sea.

The one exception, the St .Lawrence River, was, however, of decisive importance because at the time when the American colonies won their independence the St.Lawrence basin was the only settled area, the west and centre of the continent being occupied by nomadic Indians. Canada was at this time inhabited by French settlers whose only contacts with their southern neighbours were those of war. Consequently, when the United States revolted, Canada remained an English colony and the two countries expanded westward along parallel and independent lines.

After the War of American Independence , some 40,000 people, the United Empire Loyalists, who had supported

England and wished to remain under English rule, crossed the frontier into Canada. Some went to the coast provinces, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and others to Ontario north of the Great Lakes. The French, though still in a majority, were thus surrounded. For administrative purposes, Canada was divided into two provinces, Upper Canada, mainly English, and Lower Canada, or Quebec, mainly French." (pp. 454-455)

With appropriate attention to detail and the finer points of the story, of course, this basic outline of Canada's establishing is reiterated by the doyen of this country's Marxist-Leninist historians, Stanley B. Ryerson, in his classic 1962 study *The Founding of Canada: Beginnings to 1815*.

The latter work, along with its companion volume by the same author, *Unequal Union: Confederation and the Roots of Conflict in the Canadas 1815-1873* (1968), were the product of the efforts of a committee set up in 1946 (at a conference on Marxist Studies held at Toronto) to develop a People's History of Canada, an endeavour inspired by Morton's book, and analogous writings by French, American and Soviet Marxist-Leninists, as Ryerson himself records. The "people's histories" of Canada, or parts of the nation, produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s atmosphere of Castroist/Maoist/Vietnamese Communist-influenced "Left Nationalist" ideological enthusiasm, were the direct intellectual descendants of this earlier Marxist-Leninist project in popular historiography, which extended, in terms of its international origins, back into the 1930s, as we have seen.

The précis of Canada's roots that I cited from Morton's *People's History of England* paints an historical landscape seemingly quite conventional in its contours, but it must be remembered that Marxist-Leninist writers understand themselves as "properly explaining" the "facts" of liberal historiography, rather than as breaking with it entirely, so that,

for example, the "popular histories" of the emergent nation-states of Europe and the Americas written by liberal nationalist populists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are seen as providing fodder for reinterpretation in terms of the history of "class struggle", rather than just as a variant of "Whig history", or Whig historicism, itself. The Marxist-Leninist, indeed, claims to be fulfilling the promises of liberalism (albeit through announcing its inevitable overthrow), and, as such, claims to be its heir rather than its enemy (with some considerable justification).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, and now in the twenty-first, both liberal and the remaining Marxist-Leninist polities have seen a disintegration of their common older form of historicist faith (in which the problems of existence are solved by history's "unfolding") into a historicist skepticism, in which these problems are themselves radically relativized by an insistence on the absolute authority of the individual historical perspective (Existentialism and its successor Post-Modernist social thought).

A correlative cultural activity for Marxist-Leninist thinkers to the transmogrification of liberal nationalist populist historiography has been the adoption and "correction" of the populist poetry tradition which accompanied the gradual articulation to political representation of the "common peoples" of (particularly) Western Europe from the period of the migration of nations after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, through the era of the rise of the semi-orthodox Christian popular "movements", and the national "realms", of the Middle Ages, to the beginnings of the Age of Ideologies in the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment (the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, C.E.). The mythopoeic mirrors of the structures of consciousness involved in this long historical process offered by this people's poetry

tradition (taken as a whole) have been assimilated by the poets of Marxism-Leninism, often using the bridge of a Romantic spirituality (one thinks of William Morris and perhaps Mao Zedong as cases in point here), as an evidence of the naturalistic interpretation of the Hegelian "dialectic" at work in the development of the human forces and relations of production.

In the specific concrete historical circumstances of Canada (as reviewed in the opening quote of this essay from A.L.Morton), the course of People's Poetry has been necessarily fragmented and obscure in contrast with its perceived primal path in Western Europe, and its utilization by Marxist-Leninist or Marxist-Leninist-influenced poets complex and ambiguous. These qualities of the Canadian variety of the genre are illustrated by the work of three "greats" of the Canadian People's Poetry tradition, the Communist and devout and practicing member of the Roman Catholic Church, Joe Wallace, whose books appeared in Canada, the Soviet Union and China between 1942 and 1965, the sometime Communist and Theosophist, and finally Feminist Dorothy Livesay, whose landmark *Poems For People* was published in 1947, and the Communist-sympathizer, High Anglican Christian, and esotericist, Milton Acorn, whose most characteristically Marxist-Leninist "People's Poetry" volume, *More Poems For People*, was issued by the Maoist Canadian Liberation Movement in 1972.

Al Purdy was close to and active among the circles in which these Canadian People's Poets lived and wrote in Vancouver, Montreal and Ontario from the early 1950s, but he had originally been inspired to write poetry himself by (as he notes) the work of Bliss Carman and G.K.Chesterton, prominent representatives (in English) of the liberal populist nationalist "People's Poetry" that historically preceded the

Marxist-Leninist manifestation of the tradition. Furthermore, Purdy admitted that his mature work was deeply influenced by the writing of D.H.Lawrence, the British "Georgian" poet who had left that early twentieth-century populist group of authors to develop his own mystical-atheist Vitalism. So it was against this background that Purdy's dynamic friendship, and decades-long debate, with his close colleague Milton Acorn, played out in its philosophically and poetically fruitful details.

Both poets, both because of their own family histories and education in the British Commonwealth-oriented Canada of the 1920s and 1930s, were very aware of the always tenuous, but increasingly threatened, Loyalist legacy of English-Canadian culture, an insecurity that became obvious in the material realm as well after the fall of France and the Battle of Britain in 1940. The closer links with the United States forged in and following that year, which were catalytic in bringing Canada within the American orbit, had consequences for the older cultural traditions of this country that had become clear by the early 1960s, as famously explained by Canadian political philosopher George Grant in his *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965).

Purdy's reaction to the hollowing out and dissipating of Canadian culture that took place during the process of its absorption by Americanism in the 1950s and early 1960s was, apparently, to develop an attraction to Existentialism, William Barrett's definitive study of which movement, *Irrational Man*, Purdy is reported as reading during his trip to the Far North in 1965. Existentialism questions the validity of the search for the ground of being, whether in its traditional philosophical and theological forms, or its modern substitute ideological formulations, and so is disintegrative of the spiritual substance of both the orthodox Christian and esoteric

theosophical bases of the older liberal populist nationalist "People's Poetry", and the this-worldly metaphysics of its Marxist-Leninist successor. This, I would argue, underlies Purdy's perennial differences and debates with his friend and fellow poet, the Christian, theosophical and Marxist-Leninist thinker and clearly Canadian People's Poet, Milton Acorn.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the first half of the twentieth, a formal theosophical movement (following the lead of the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875) heavily influenced the literary, artistic and other elements of the opinion-forming classes of the modern world. In Canada, as John Robert Colombo and other writers have pointed out, the high-water mark of this intellectual tide came in the 1920s and '30s, and its appeal here (as elsewhere) lay in its quasi-political combination of esoteric religiosity, nationalism and cultural pride. The Laurier-Liberal promise of a century belonging to Canada was intensified by some Theosophists' speculation that the True North contained the site of the Imperishable Sacred Land, the oldest part of the earth and the home of the First Root Race. The artistic *oeuvre* of the central figure of the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris, was imbued with these notions, and still-surviving imaginations of the "Canadian spirit", such as the "mystique of the Canadian Shield", can best be understood as Theosophical hangovers from this period, it would seem.

The title which the contemporary liberal opinion-forming classes of English-speaking Canada bestowed upon Al Purdy, "The Voice of the Land", probably reflects a similar intellectual provenance, and it seems appropriate for both Purdy's brilliant evocations of several aspects of the concrete Canadian experience, and the underlying naturalistic mysticism (akin to the Vitalism of D.H.Lawrence) behind them. However, it does not capture the sceptical, image-

breaking, anti-ideological and anti-metaphysical "negative mystical civil theology" (as it were) of his own Existentialist embodiment of what Canadians had become in the modern age of accomplished Continentalism, now Globalization.

Madame Helena Blavatsky, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, perhaps suggests in her final book, associated by experts with the thought of Mahayana Buddhist texts, a name that poetically speaks the potentials of the full amplitude of Purdy's poetic project:

> Before the Soul can see, the harmony within must be attained, and
> fleshly eyes be rendered blind to all illusions.
> Before the Soul can hear, the image (man) has to become as deaf to
> roaring as to whispers, to cries of bellowing elephants as to the silvery
> buzzing of the golden firefly.
> Before the Soul can comprehend and may remember, she must unto
> the Silent Speaker be united, just as the form to which the clay is
> modeled is first united with the potter's mind.
> For then the soul will hear, and will remember.
> And then the inner ear will speak-
>
> THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE

Madoc Public Library and Cultural Centre, Madoc, Ontario
(August 2, 2008)

IV
THE SELF-COMPLETING TREE: DOROTHY LIVESAY AND THE THEOSOPHICAL MUSE

(a paper given at the symposium on the work of Dorothy Livesay in the William Shannon Room, Marmora Public Library, on August 3, 2013, as part of the Purdy Country Literary Festival, Marmora, Ontario)

In *The Literary History of Canada* (1976), Canadian An6archist thinker and literary intellectual George Woodcock wrote:

"(A.J.M) Smith and (F.R.) Scott followed (in the 1960s and early '70s) fairly predictable courses, the character of their poetry remaining virtually unchanged as they proceeded increasingly into the dimension of personal detachment; the poems they wrote after 1960 do not notably modify previous estimates of their total achievement. The case is quite different with Dorothy Livesay, who has created what is virtually a second life in poetry, as she herself appears to have recognized in devising the title for her definitive volume: *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons*. In her case too there has been a progression from the social to the personal, but accompanied by a radical change in her poetic style that came about when she returned to Canada in 1963 after a period of teaching in Zambia. The break in experience which her life in Africa represented was followed by a spell of linguistic research, and by a deep immersion in the resurgence of new poets and poetry which she found in progress in Vancouver on her return..." (Vol. 3,pp. 307-308)

At the conclusion of her memoir of the years 1909 to 1963, *Journey With My Selves* (published in 1991), Livesay

confirms Woodcock's observation that her Zambian experience, and involvement with the new West Coast Canadian poets after her return to Canada in 1963, engendered a "second life in poetry"(in Woodcock's phrase) for her, dividing her *Selected Poems* (1972) indeed into the products of two different seasons of her life. She also offers details in her memoir of the nature of the poets who helped inspire this watershed in her life and work at this time:

"...My passionate interest in Zambia sought and found release in mingling with young poets of the Tish group, who likewise were stimulated by other poets – the Black Mountain crowd. What a summer that was, mingling with Earle Birney's selection of poetry makers. I became so keen on the new movement that I applied to do an M. Ed. on the subject: 'Rhythm and Sound in Contemporary Canadian Poetry.' That thesis was accepted in 1965. More important, at that time many of my poems from *The Unquiet Bed* and *Plainsongs* were written, poems that freely expressed the pent-up passion within me. Its origin had been the Zambian experience." (*Journey*, p. 217)

Thus, on her own account, Livesay's "second life" as a poet was generated by her encounter with Zambia in combination with that of the Canadian version of the American Black Mountain spirit, which latter, according to historian Martin Duberman, elevated " the artist...'as a holy person',"and regarded " the rest of the world...as 'utterly corrupt', unclean." (*Black Mountain*, p. 399). As both the poet and the commentators on her work recognized, the "self" that emerged from the Zambian/Black Mountain experience expressed a different ethos from that of the socialist "self" (that had produced her secular profession of social worker as well as her Communist politics), of the 1930s. More overtly affective, more individualistic, and more feminist, Livesay's

poetic persona after 1963 chimed well with the beginnings of the Western Counter-Cultural Movement of the 1960s, which, while often using the language of the Marxist "Old Left", really found its intellectual roots in European Existentialism, as many scholars have noted.

In 1986, Dorothy Livesay published a new "Selected Poems" which she indicated in a brief preface "is the selection of poems that I would like to be remembered by." As the title (and the front cover picture showing an elderly Livesay standing with right forearm leaning on an aged tree) show, this last collection is composed of poems from every period of the poet's life, arranged thematically to illustrate the growth and development of the whole body of her work and of the life experiences from which it flowed. The contents are divided into seven sections, each preceded by a brief prose preface, and it is the first of these, "The Self-Completing Tree", that provides the title (and the preface already referred to) for the book as a whole.

My brief meeting with Dorothy Livesay, mentioned in my *After Acorn* (p.28), occurred in 1985, during a time when there was a great deal of academic interest in her work. As I had only a brief opportunity to speak with the poet (we were lunch companions), I asked her who or what had most inspired her as a socialist poet, and she named A.M. Stephen, the "Canadian socialist poet" of Vancouver, who had been "a theosophist first ", and was "president of the Canadian Labour Defence League and activist with the League Against War and Fascism". She also noted that her "getting in touch with *New Frontier* (the Communist Party of Canada's cultural journal) in Toronto in 1936 " had been formative.

As the poet had mentioned that her husband (Duncan Macnair) had been a Theosophist, and I was aware of the important role of Theosophy in the rise of modern ideological

mass movements (including socialism and feminism), I stated in *After Acorn* that Livesay "had told me that she...had been a Theosophist first (before becoming a socialist)". While literally and chronologically untrue, and, indeed, a mistake in memory of my conversation with Livesay, I believe that this telescoping error helps us understand Livesay's own ultimate analysis of herself and her work in terms of a "self-completing tree."

George Woodcock, in the same historical essay referred to above, notes that A.M. Stephen, (whom he calls A.M. Stephens), died in 1942, and was a "belated Confederation poet" who had his "last unpublished verse" appear posthumously in *Songs for a New Nation* (1963). He also remarks that Stephen's work was "praised by (Sir Charles G.D.) Roberts", called "the Father of Canadian Literature", who himself died in 1943.

In Livesay's autobiographical reflections (*Journey with My Selves*), her encounter with A.M. Stephen in Vancouver in 1936, suggested by the staff of *New Frontier*, occurs after a period beyond Canada's borders, and marks a similar divide in her life to her return to that city from Zambia in 1963, an event which we have already considered. Having moved west to promote *New Frontier* after spending a year (1934-1935) in Englewood, New Jersey, as a social worker and Communist organizer, a period described in the chapter "Crossing the Border" in her memoir, Livesay contacted A.M. Stephen to help find writers, journalists and poets who might want to submit work to the magazine, and others who might want to sell subscriptions to it. With regard to the latter category, Livesay recalls Stephen as having uttered the following, as it turned out, fateful words:

"I think I have just the man for you. He is a Scot from Glasgow- veteran of the Great War who first came to

Vancouver around 1920 and fell in love with this young city. He met Dr. Ernest Fewster and other members of the Poetry Society and the theosophical group. Then he went off to Australia. Next we met him returning from China in 1927; and here he is again..." (*Journey* in *In Her Own Words,* p. 317)

This, of course, is a description of Duncan Macnair, an accountant who had worked in gold-mining camps in northern Ontario during the first part of the Depression, and whom Livesay would shortly meet and later marry (1937). As she recalls, what impressed her about Macnair "was his enthusiastic response to poets and philosophers", the fact that" he knew something about politics also, for he had lived and worked in China at the time of its upheavals in the 1920s", and his taste in poets and poetry, as "he knew and admired", as she did, "the poets Charles G.D.Roberts and Bliss Carman, as well as the Toronto poetry lovers associated with them", particularly liking "poets like Charlie (Roberts)...because they toured the inner country, the north and west, meeting Canada's working people." (*Journey*, pp. 153-154)

The years 1934-1936 had been complicated for those associated with the international Communist movement, and possibly confusing, as the Comintern had shifted from a classical "left" strategy to a "right" strategy, both of which were described as "united front" policies, as historian John H. Kautsky shows in his study *Moscow and the Communist Party of India*. For Livesay, in Englewood, New Jersey, and later back in Canada during the pivotal year of 1935, and probably for her close friend Gina Watts, both of whom had accepted the Marxian "dialectical" view of history as students at the University of Toronto about 1931, the change from an alliance "from below" to one "from above" (i.e. with anti-Fascist, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal elements, however capitalist) would have constituted a disruption, but hardly a

stumbling-block. For Watts, the change stimulated her to go to Spain with Norman Bethune as an ambulance driver, and with her husband, Lon Lawson, to spearhead the founding of *New Frontier*. For Livesay, on the other hand, as I shall argue, the result of this ideological shift was more radical, leading her to gradually uncover and affirm an earlier stratum in her psychological composition, (and in the. character of the Hegelian "dialectic" itself), the theosophical.

Livesay's encounter, as a contributor to and publicist for *New Frontier* in 1935-1936, with the non-Marxist-Leninist socialist-theosophist cultural community of Vancouver, one of whose members she married, awakened an aspect of her radicalism that had always been present. Throughout her career as a poet a self-described Romantic, Livesay had first been influenced politically (beyond her radical father) by the Romantic Anarcho-Socialism of Emma Goldman whom she heard lecture in Toronto when only a teenager. As Canadian chronicler Roy MacGregor has told us, in the 1920s and 1930s, Theosophy "was...so popular in Canada that it was known by its celebrities", such as "Dr. Frederick Banting, (Lawren) Harris (and Franklin) Carmichael of the Group of Seven, Dr. Emily Stowe, the first woman to practice medicine in this country, *Saturday Night* magazine editor William Arthur Deacon...and newspaperman Albert Smythe", father of Conn Smythe, "the long-time owner of the Toronto Maple Leafs and the man who built Maple Leaf Gardens..." Indeed, as MacGregor points out, Canadian theosophists of the 1920s and 1930s (like those in Ireland and Germany, we might add) applied theosophical teachings to their national destiny:

"One of the theories this elite group particularly liked directly involved Canada. According to a 1982 article by former *Globe* book editor William French, who was not a member, the Canadian theosophists of the 1920s and 1930s

believed that the intellectual and cultural flowering that began back in ancient Greece was but the start of a long cycle that would eventually reach its pinnacle right here-with Canada's destiny to shine, as an example to the rest of the world, of a place where everything came together exactly as imagined.

Intelligence would rule, spiritualism would guide and, of course, justice would prevail."

John Robert Colombo has published extensive research on the prominent role of theosophy among Canada's opinion-forming classes prior to World War II, particularly regarding Lawren Harris and the Group of Seven, and recently Ross King, in his *Defiant Spirits: the Modernist Revolution of the Group of Seven*, has extended the latter aspect of this analysis, showing its American, and particularly New York, roots.

With a father, J.F.B. Livesay, who was general manager of the Canadian Press Cooperative News Service, and a mother, Florence Randal Livesay, a journalist and translator *au fait* with the liberal New York literary world, Livesay must have been aware of the Theosophical thought prominently "in the air " growing up in the Toronto area in the 1920s. In her memoirs she records hearing the great Irish Theosophist, and precursor of the Dublin political events of 1916, (as William Irwin Thompson has shown), "AE" (George Russell), while a student at the University of Toronto, and her youthful period of residence in Provence, London and Paris (all historically centres of theosophical thought and activity) may have strengthened her awareness of the theosophical world view. But it was her sojourn in the New York region in 1934-1935, I believe, that acted as the catalyst to make Livesay, in effect, a socialist-theosophist.

Livesay's *Journey with My Selves* (1991) is excerpted in Jill Ker Conway's feminist-oriented *In Her Own Words: Women's Memoirs from Australia, New Zealand, Canada,*

and the United States (1999), and, interestingly, the chapter of the memoir dealing with Livesay's (as I believe) critical year (1934-1935) spent living, working and organizing in New York/New Jersey (pp. 144-151 in the original) is entirely left out. From a poetic point of view, this seems odd, as Livesay notes (on page 148 of the original book) that "at this time I made the greatest literary discovery of my life...(when) in a Greenwich Village bookshop I found the poetry of Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis." From an ideological perspective, however, the lacuna is perhaps understandable, as the passage reveals Livesay as both strongly attracted to the cultural life of New York, and the politics of the Rooseveltian National Reconstruction Administration (as opposed to Canadian cultural backwardness, and social welfarism), and deeply involved with the Communist Party of the United States, both as an organizer and a student (she signed up for a course in Marxism-Leninism at the Workers' School in New York).

As has been pointed out above, as John Kautsky shows, the International Communist Movement (the Comintern, directed from Moscow), adopted a "right" strategy at this period, so that the National Reconstruction Administration could be considered as "anti-Fascist, anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal", although obviously "bourgeois", by loyal Communists (such as Livesay). Such a view may seem peculiar to those growing up in the era of the "Cold War" (particularly after 1947), for, as Kautsky outlines, the Soviet government directed the world Communist movement after that date using a policy that combined elements of both the "left" and "right" strategies, that Kausky denominates (after its pioneering in China in the 1920s-1940s) "Neo-Maoism", an approach that viewed the United States itself as an "imperialist" power. It was this "Neo-Maoism", of course, that eventually issued in the

Canadian Left Nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Livesay had followed her close friend and Comrade Gina Watts (now married to Lon Lawson) to New York's Chelsea area, where the former was studying acting and directing with luminaries of the Group Theatre. As has been shown in a recent study by Columbia University Journalist professor Robert Love, *The Great Oom: The Improbable Birth of Yoga in America*, the influence of Dr. Pierre Bernard (real name Perry Baker)'s Tantric yoga cultural centre (called the Clarkstown Country Club), located in the outer suburbs of New York City at Nyack, New York, on the west bank of the Hudson River just above the New Jersey line, upon the theatrical, literary, general cultural, and even political and economic life of the great city, and of the United States, was at its peak during the mid-1930s. As explained by Love, "Dr. Bernard"'s teaching combined an esoteric Hindu understanding of Hatha Yoga with elements of theosophical and Masonic lore and American secular Puritan "affirmation of the body" to produce a "mind cure" that chimed well with the needs of the mass casualties of "the Gilded Age" and the ensuing Depression. Clarkstown'spanacea appealed to New York's high society (the Vanderbilts were participants and financial supporters), musicians (Leopold Stokowski, Pete Seeger and John Jacob Niles, whom Bob Dylan claimed as an influence, were "graduates"), and movie stars, but it was also tailored at this time to attract the middle-classes, who, as Livesay notes in her memoir of her time in New Jersey as a social worker, were the most affected there by the Depression. "Dr. Bernard" viewed his efforts to expand his cultural (both in the physical and spiritual senses) program at Clarkstown at this period to be an expression of the "local self-help" aspect of Roosevelt's National Reconstruction effort, and its practical employment results were certainly appreciated in this way by

the working and middle classes of the Nyack area.

Love's study aims to show that yoga became as American as yogurt (as it were) long before the 1960s, and throughout he points out that the particular version of yoga that appealed to "Dr. Bernard " was the Hatha Yoga of the Tantric Hindu esoteric tradition (he notes that Bernard's original name for his group was "the Tantriks") which he amalgamated with American esotericism and common sense (in its connotation of "commonly accepted opinions"). Love notes that the treatises of the Hindu Tantra (as standard reference works confirm) are outside the main current of Hindu thinking, are concerned with problems of ritual, magic and sexuality, and stress the female principle. These were the same qualities, probably derived from pre-Hindu and Mongolian sources, that made them attractive to the founders of the European and American "occult revival" of the late nineteenth century, the most prominent of whom were Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, who established the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875.

Many of the themes articulated by this official Theosophy had been current in New York City and State in the 1860s, published in the writings of the "Seer of Poughkeepsie", Andrew Jackson Davis, and the "sex magician" Paschal Beverly Randolph. By the 1930s, the Theosophical movement had branched into sects and tendencies, Alice Bailey's Arcane School being set up in New York and New Jersey in 1923, and "Colonel" James Churchward's popular series of theosophically-inspired occult historiographic "Mu" books appearing from good New York publishers regularly from 1926 until just before his death ten years later in Mount Vernon, a district just north of the Bronx. Part of this now-complex theosophical subculture was Bernard's "Tantrik Order", which had transferred to New York from Seattle in

1909-1910, obviously to locate in the current theosophical "Mecca". Both the Arcane School and, as we have seen, the Tantrik Order (as the Clarkstown Country Club), were, by the 1930s, articulating a "liberal progressive" political ideology; i.e., one that a Communist following the "right" strategy as the Party was throughout the world from "about 1935", (as Kautsky puts it), could readily support.

Livesay gives no indication in her memoir of her time in New Jersey (1934-1935) of her awareness of the considerable theosophical "climate of opinion" in New York and region then, or of the existence of the Tantrik Order/Clarkstown Country Club in particular. However, it is unlikely that she did not know of the latter, as the activities of "Dr. Bernard" and his followers were often covered in the Press, Livesay was in close contact with the theatrical and artistic communities through her friends, the Lawsons, and Englewood, her place of residence and work, is only a few miles from Nyack, the home of the C.C.C. on the west bank of the Hudson.

In her "Crossing the Border" chapter, Livesay does recall difficulties in her personal life (of a romantic nature), and problems with the composition of her local Communist Party cell, which seemed to be made up mostly of people of non-proletarian origin, as well as her resentment at the decrees that seemed to be handed down by a faceless Party Central. As a result, she records that she "dropped out of the (P)arty", and later suffered what she described as "a sort of nervous breakdown ", in which she "felt alien, far from her roots, and without any time to meditate or write". This led her to resign from her social work job as well, and return to Canada in the fall of 1935.

Livesay relates that "after several months' convalescence, safe in the snowy woods of Clarkson (Ontario), I began to

revive and relive my New Jersey experiences", an exercise that was very fruitful for her poetic production. This interlude at her childhood home, and family country retreat, which functioned for her as "Dr. Bernard"'s Clarkstown Country Club had been doing for years for the society matrons, literary and artistic classes, and, increasingly in the 1930s, disturbed members of the middle class of New York and the United States as a strategy for body/mind cure, prepared her for her move to the West as emissary of *New Frontier*, and for the discovery of the socialist-theosophists of British Columbia in 1936.

Livesay admitted that her husband, Duncan Macnair, was "more of a theosophist than a marxist", and that "he sought to temper my political rigidities", as Val Ross noted in her "Lives Lived" article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* after the poet died. In passages of her memoirs related to her life after her marriage in 1937, there are respectful references to "the Cabala", to quasi-religious advice given by "a theosophist friend", and to bad omens and sorcery, which latter she had clearly believed in as a young woman (for example in the case of an encounter with the Canadian Romantic poet, Wilson MacDonald, recounted earlier in *Journey with My Selves*). Indeed, during the late 1930s and 1940s, Livesay herself seems to have been gradually becoming a socialist-theosophist.

As intimated at the outset, Livesay's final poetic persona, stimulated by her experiences in Zambia and with the Canadian representatives of the Black Mountain School after her return to Canada in 1963, is proto-"New Left" and Existentialist in character, and thus more fully theosophical (or neo-gnostic) than Marxist socialist. The process of the emergence of "selfhood" (as the poet calls the discovery of the overself) is a long one, well-described by the image of "the

self-completing tree" (reminiscent of occult interpretations of the Sephirotic Tree of the Kabbalah). Indeed, Livesay's original intention in going West in 1936 had been, as she says in her memoir," to get to the literary scene in San Francisco". As is generally accepted, it was this "scene" (as the "San Francisco Renaissance"), that later generated the Sixties Movement in the literary sense, with linking figures such as the Gnostic poet Robert Duncan associating the Black Mountain School's project with the same development. The recent scholarship of Robert Love, discussed above, argues for the New York theosophical "scene" (and especially the Tantrik Order of "the Great Oom", as the Press called "Dr. Pierre Bernard") as a third great source (and perhaps the original one) of the cultural revolution of the Sixties. And to paraphrase the title of an old pop-history TV program of the 1950s, in some important sense, " Dorothy Livesay was there".

James Deahl and Milton Bruce Meyer Acorn

CHAPTER 2
MILTON ACORN:
THE LAST ROMANTIC LOYALIST?

I

All admirers of the work of Milton Acorn must have noticed how little was written about it in the last decade of his life. This may, of course, be considered to be a blessing by those (probably including the poet) who sought to see "Peoples' Poetry" kept out of the clutches of the Lit. Crit. industry. The beginnings of a serious Acorn criticism *did* exist in the 1960s, however, but for reasons other than just changes in the intellectual fashions, these initiatives did not develop.

One obvious reason is that Acorn, who consciously wrote as a Man of the Left,said many things that contemporary socialists and "progressives" found hard to identify with. A good example of an association of ideas that is foreign to the mind of the modern Leftist is found in Acorn's 1982 poem,"The Sinking of the Belgrano":

> Like six hundred embryos at advanced terms
> The crew of the Belgrano has been drowned
> By means of the latest technology.
> Glug-glug-glug! God save the Queen
> In a chilly part of the Atlantic
> Not to liberate the Argentines
> Or Irish, or the Poles, simply for oil
> Which you can get by planting olives...
> *(Dig Up My Heart, page 208)*

The criticism here of capitalist (particularly British) imperialism is not unusual, but linking it with an implicit censure of both abortion and technology certainly is. The image flowing from the pun on the title of the British national anthem is also a peculiar one for a Dialectical Materialist to use.

Anomalies such as these, found throughout Acorn's work, led to charges that he was really a neo-Christian, an eccentric, or simply confused. A "review in retrospect" of Acorn's poetry at this point, such as Michael Gnarowski undertook in 1964, would, I believe, reveal the real roots of Acorn's poetics and politics to be in Romanticism.

Something of this conclusion comes through in the earlier-existing literature on Acorn, although the portraits of the poet's attitude to Being tend to be one-sided. Gnarowski favours what might be called the "romantic regionalist" view of Acorn, emphasizing "this rough man's incredible capacity for beautiful effect." (June, 1964 issue of *Culture*, page 127)

Dorothy Livesay sketches the development of the "social revolutionary poet defying the sickness of capitalist society" in her early study of Acorn's poetry (Spring, 1969 issue of *Canadian Literature*, page 40). Both Gnarowski and Livesay present a component of Acorn's Romanticism, but only Fred Cogswell's short review of *Jawbreakers* (Spring, 1963 issue of *Fiddlehead*) gives us a glimpse of the whole landscape that we find in Acorn's work.

Cogswell observes that " to read the poetry of Milton Acorn is to move in concentric circles, for he is at home in several worlds."The spheres that are identified are those of "the delicate beauty and slow, traditional life of the Maritime provinces", the "bone-hard [society] of urban life", and, "over-riding these", the interior world of a man "whose

passion and imagination like arc-lamps blaze as they leap in mental flight the gap between the ideal of what the world could be and the sorry mess which men in society and as individuals make of things." This third "lofty region", Cogswell notes, actually contains three "arc-light gaps" that Acorn seeks to span; the social, the sexual, and the gulf between "outer appearance and inner reality". Cogswell sees Acorn leaping this, implicitly most fundamental, third existential chasm by means of a "transfiguring inner vision that is needed to redeem the world's ignorance, malice, and ugliness". He finds this vision best expressed in Acorn's poem "Pastoral":

> That sudden time I heard
> the pulse of song in a thrush throat
> my windy visions fluttered
> like snow-clouds buffeting the moon..
>
> I was born into an ambush
> of preachers, propagandists, grafters,
> ("Fear life and death!" "Hate and pay me!")
> and tho I learned to despise them all
> my dreams were of rubbish and destruction.
>
> But that song, and the drop-notes
> of a brook truckling thru log-breaks and cedars,
> I came to on numb clumsy limbs
> to find outside the beauty inside me.
> (*Dig Up My Heart*, page 17)

Interestingly, it is this poem that opens Al Purdy's 1983 selection from the Acorn oeuvre, *Dig Up My Heart* (Selected

Poems 1952-83). This is entirely appropriate, as it introduces a number of the key images that make up the imaginative universe that the book explores. Birds are the operative analogues, the *natural law* of this world. They correspond with the poet's brain and heart, with the inner organs of his understanding. The birds fill Acorn's cloudy intuitions with content and power, taking him beyond the present world of competitive lies and nihilistic revenge upward to the heavenly bodies and back to unspoilt Nature.

Purdy's choice is informed by a long personal association and friendship with the poet, as well as a scepticism of the political theory (Marxism/Leninism) which Acorn has coupled with his poetic vision. The result is a clear presentation of Acorn's 'myth', or an attitude to Being, shorn of the radical rhetoric that has often obscured it.

Purdy early recognized that Acorn's "communist-socialist religion furnishes him with a motivating and almost entirely ready-made passion." (*Evidence*, #8, 1964, page 120). George Bowering, at the time a not-unfriendly critic, noted in his review of *I've Tasted My Blood* (Autumn, 1969 issue of *Canadian Literature*, page 85) that Acorn's "Politics are as much a poet's communism as Shelley's were". Livesay also (in the article referred to above) implicitly connects Acorn with the Shelleyan tradition of Romantic revolutionism, as well as finding echoes of Blake in some of his work.

These observations all suggest a spiritual affinity with something other than the militaryinterpretation of Marx propounded by Lenin; namely, the Imaginative Socialism of such Marxists as William Morris and Eduard Bernstein or such non-Marxists as F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, all of whom owed more to Schiller and Coleridge than to Goethe or Hegel.

This Romantic socialism certainly had its representatives in Canada in the nineteenth century, as Ramsay Cook hasshown. Prominent amongst them, although not mentioned by Cook, was Archibald Lampman. The influences upon Lampman included Platonism, the German patriotic poets of 1848, and the scion of the Swabian School of poetry, Eduard Morike. Lampman's notion of socialism involved participation in the moral evolution of the world-soul, and he made a clear distinction between patriotism and nationalism (as did Eduard Bernstein, the father of critical common-sense socialism). Lampman considered patriotism to be natural and good, while he thought that nationalism was an artificial aberration.

In an interview published in 1979 (*intrinsic!*,7&8), Acorn remarked: "I much admire Archibald Lampman for what he says –not so much for how he says it ... He wrote a very fine poem, 'The City of the End of Things'..." Furthermore, in a letter in response to George Bowering that appeared in *Blackfish* (Winter-Spring, 1972-73). Acorn states that he was "much more influenced by German models" than by Charles Olson. Lampman (like Kingsley and Morris) was deeply in debt to "Germanism" in his day, and it is interesting to speculate whether Acorn would have fallen for the lure of Lenin (and his troupe of dialectical tricksters) if Lampman had been successful in achieving his objectives by founding a distinctly Canadian and truly socialist poetic tradition in this country.

The only forms of socialism available for Acorn to choose from during his Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto years were the watered-down pragmatism and social gospel purveyed by F.R.Scott and his circle, and the apparently more vital (or, at least, exciting) varieties of communist vanguardism. Acorn

was associated with most of these vanguard groups at one time or another. The most profound, as well as the most personally damaging, of these involvements was with the Canadian Liberation Movement (CLM) in the early 1970's. The CLM was a Maoist sect, the ideology of which was an extension of Lenin's nationalities theory. In its equation of socialism with Canadian nationalism, the CLM provided precisely the type of potent brew that intoxicated German Social-Democracy prior to the First World War, and that produced the " nationalist socialism" of the Soviet Union and so much of the Third World.

After his traumatic experience with the CLM, Acorn increasingly reverted to the "spilled religion" of Romanticism, which has always formed the spiritual substructure of his thought. As the recent work of such scholars as Ernest Lee Tuveson has shown, the Romantic movement constituted a fairly early phase of the mass adoption, by Western Europeans, of the Hermetic philosophy of the Renaissance. This was a branch of the ancient Gnostic religion, the traditional enemy of both Middle Platonism and Christianity.

In its first two stages of popularization, however, Hermetism (which in essence teaches the self-development of the self) was parasitic upon an objective cosmology; namely, that which is shared by Christianity and neo-Platonism. After passing through these theological and metaphysical stages, Hermetists discarded objectivity, and entered the truly Gnostic third and fourth stages of positive "absorption" and negative nihilism. Examples of positive absorption can be found in the poetry of Whitman and the philosophy of Hegel, while negative nihilism is represented by confessional poetry and existentialism.

Romanticism rose on the cusp of the second and third

stages of the historical realization of the Hermetic heresy, a point that can be located somewhere between the metaphysical poets and Novalis. Living at this psychological place, the Romantics simultaneously looked back with longing to a Christian and Platonic universe of ordered being, by which the becoming of both man and Nature is measured, and forward to the time when Man, the most advanced emanation of the cosmos, would bend back upon both the divine and the natural, and be the measure, maker and indeed master of all things.

The Romantic's attempt to reconcile Classical and Mediaeval contemplative wisdom with modern manipulative methods is never really successful. Acorn, like Shelley and Blake before him, cannot seem to make up his mind whether there is an objective Ground of Being or whether he has to invent it through sheer will. His obvious longing to recover the Classical and Mediaeval identification of knowledge with love is thus constantly thwarted by his insistence on the Modern (and Gnostic) equation of knowledge with power.

The Romantic is not the true Modern. Moderns such as Whitman and Hegel had no doubts about their own divinity. Even if the Romantic does not understand the nature of the critical gap between the two perspectives, he certainly feels them fracturing his psyche. Indeed, his very being is, in a sense, that gap. While the politics flowing from such a position can, in fact, amount to no more than "love and anger", it is perhaps only one who has a Romantic cast ofmind who can proceed to an informed and non-obscurantist critique of modernity.

There is evidence in Acorn's later work (much of which is unpublished) that he did at least move in the direction of analyzing the Romantic consciousness itself. As Lampman .

critically worked with the image of the City that he had inherited from James Thomson, Coleridge, and Poe, so Acorn has explicated the even more typically Hermetic image of the bird, the basic myth of which is traceable back at least to Henry Vaughan, as expressed in the following verses:

> And now as fresh and cheerful as the light
> Thy little heart in early hymns doth sing
> Unto that Providence, whose unseen arm
> Curb'd them, and cloath'd thee well and warm.
> All things that be, praise him; and had
> Their lesson taught them when first made.
> *("The Bird", Works, II 496)(Nuttall, p, 202)*

> I would I were some Bird, or Star,
> Flutt'ring in woods, or lifted far
> Above this Inne
> And Rode of sin!
> Then neither Star, or Bird, should be
> Shining, or singing still to thee.
> (*Works*, II 477) (Nuttall, p, 200)

Although couched in the language of the Puritan-Christian doctrines of a scrutable Providence and moral perfectability, the development described here by Vaughan is the Hermetic transmutation. For Vaughan, nature (including birds and stars) was unaffected by the fall of man. Thus, redemption of man from his sorry state could be achieved by the assumption of the powers of nature.

The same basic myth appears in Acorn, stripped of its theological language and sharpened, as in "Lifeblood Soliloquy":

1

I see a robin on the rain-soaked lawn.
His heart's a swift electric spark
and wee legs drive in packed explosive hops

Each action's a life-embodied thought;
each thought reflexive, instant with the deed.
Movement distilled, unseen between its poses,
his pin-holed head
listens for worms' dumb secrecy.

2

There's a bird whose name I've never heard
only the variations of its song.
It comes between false dawn and dawn
to a black tree and sings to me.

I'll seep down into earth, rise and become that
bird:
tune and rhythm tight in tiny brain
to spout thru tonal throat,
ring stratospheric layers with my joy.
(*Dig Up My Heart*, page 75)

The search for the name and power of the unknown bird of inspiration and transmutation may be connected with Acorn's interest in ravens, as expressed, for example, in thepoem "The Raven Conceit", published shortly after the poet's death in *Whiskey Jack*:

That raven wore a tight toque on his head
Quite black of course, plus a body-stocking
Blithe russet brown, for those raven-pelts
Have touches and tinges that loose gawking

Without a raven's gaze will not descry
So that you are strange to news of yourself...
That shadows are not black but coloured .
I saw him as oneself, as Christ himself.

The Christ (the raven here) is, of course, the 'higher self' of Hermetism, Hermes Trismegistus (Thoth), the scribe and messenger of the gods, and at once the sacred ibis and the operating magus himself. Like W.B.Yeats and, more recently, Robert Duncan, Acorn has pursued the Hermetic bird to the Eastern roost where (as Nietzsche knew) its burden of cyclical time was most fully hatched. In his posthumously-publishe d poem "Many Circles in This Constellation" (for Ruhollah Khomeini), Acorn reaches the Gnostic abyss where the ideas spiral as dark angels:

Headlights make the fire. God can look through eyes.
The entrance to heaven is a tornado
Spinning black up from a golden sun.
Mankind is wonderful in these drear times
That we may look at him and try to judge
More than a rumour blurred by wind and guns.

Mohamet was at first declared a prophet
In privacy by his enchanted wife.

The Mahdi is distinguished by a gap
In his teeth perhaps, or which he stands before…
A door into another strong dimension
Like solid as an odd county of time.
Look at this man and let your pulse rhyme
With his a moment, circling in this constellation.

Unlike so many other poets of the spirit in this century, Acorn does not follow this route out of Romanticism, a route which led Yeats and Pound to the politics of the arch-magus. This is apparently so because Acorn also has strong attachment to the critical common-sense element in the Romantic tradition, that reverts, via the Scottish Enlightenment, to Aristotelian right reason and Stoic ethics. Like Eduard Bernstein, the poet has a confident, although realistic, faith in the potential for goodness and good sense of his fellow humans.

Acorn's loyalty to both the Gnostic and the objective sides of Romanticism allows him to intuitively sense and critically focus on the gaps in humanity and logic left at each stage of the modern Hermetic leap. This critique extends from the first stage to the fourth. As Acorn's poem "Portrait of Elizabeth I" suggests, his productive imagination, at least, is aware that, as Frances Yates has shown, the sixteenth-century Hermetic cult of the sovereign coupled with Puritan "welfare statism" was the progenitor of the Baconian gospel of technocracy, the modern imperialist idea, and the ideology of capitalism. As critical of much that is intrinsic to the fourth stage of the realization of Hermetism in the twentieth century as he is of aspects of its first stage, Acorn has particularly directed his censure against the social acceptance of abortion as a good (which he considers to be a symptom of widespread nihilism).

If Milton Acorn is irreplaceable as Canada's Peoples' Poet, this may be because he seems to be our last Romantic loyalist. Romanticism is a crossroads, with signs pointing in various directions. In the twentieth century, the choice that has forced itself upon most travellers has been that between the path of Gnostic politics and the way of traditional faith. Acorn seemed not to have fully made a choice; for him, and for his work, this may have been the critical gap.

II
MILITANT HERE IN EARTH:
A Literary Context for Milton Acorn's Anglican Romanticism

(*based on a talk given at the Blue Angel Gallery, Hamilton. Ontario. Palm Sunday, 2006)*

In response to what I consider to be the rather sketchy attempts by Milton Acorn's biographers and commentators to situate the People's Poet's ideas in the context of intellectual history, or even of his own time, I have suggested that he is perhaps best understood as a Canadian Anglican Romantic, and in my recent book *Beyond Bethune,* I think I provide some literary evidence for this notion, and, indeed, some details of what I mean by the term. Of course, no-one who is familiar with Acorn's life story questions that he was raised and buried as an Anglo-Catholic in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, or that he was a self-identified Romantically-influenced poet, and many of his friends knew that he prayed regularly, and, at least during his childhood (until the age of 13 or 14) andin the last decade of his life, was frequently a regular church-goer. However, what I attempted to argue is that Acorn's own stated admiration (to his friend James Deahl) in his latter years for the "social science fiction" (as it might be called) of Anglican Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, and the political philosophy of Canadian Anglican writer George Parkin Grant, shows that Anglican Romanticism was probably formative in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s for Acorn's sensibility. Furthermore, what I try to outline in *Beyond Bethune*, and its "prequel", *After Acorn,* is an account of the apocalyptic-Gnostic and Hermetic elements in Acorn's thought, which were both so attractive

and puzzling to Acorn's admirers (for example, his Goddess or rather Isis-worship, his interest in Shi'ite Islam, and his Egyptianism) that link it to the nineteenth and early-twentieth century (often quasi-Christian) Anglo-American theosophy and occultism that found fertile soil in (frequently High) Anglican circles (e.g. in the work of poet Charles Williams).

This general line of inquiry may seem to be somewhat irrelevant to both partisans

and opponents of the Left Nationalist Anglo-Canadian Populism for which Acorn was the most articulate poetic spokesperson of the late twentieth century, and for which he is justly primarily remembered as the People's Poet. However, it is my belief that here too, Acorn's Anglican Romantic connection throws considerable light upon both the ideological content of Acorn's work and the reasons for its wide popular appeal in Canada during the era of the twilight of Canadian nationalism and identity forty years ago.

Acorn's best biographer to date, Richard Lemm, notes that the sources of the poet's youthful Communism are unknown, and must be assumed to be the usual ones of the alienated sensitive intellectually-inclined adolescent of the time (that is, his eclectic reading and, presumably, the public media of the 1930s, with their coverage of the political results of the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism and National Socialism, the Spanish Civil War, etc., although, oddly, Lemm does not discuss these social realities of the era in any depth). Perhaps because of his being an American-born literary scholar who did not come to Canada until 1967, Lemm displays no knowledge of (and perhaps little interest in) the general political culture of Canada and the British Commonwealth during the 1930s in which Acorn grew up, and this may have caused him to look no further than the obvious in his clearly

well-intentioned search for Acorn's formative political influences, thus overlooking popular Anglican-based social and political commentary (which included a component favourable to Soviet Communism) that emerged in the 1930s in Britain and Commonwealth countries, carrying on with a significant public presence (as part of the war effort) through the 1940s, and not petering out until the mid-1950s, after the Korean War, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the revelations about the brutalities of the regime of Joseph Stalin.

Representative of this mid-twentieth century renaissance of Anglican Christian Socialism, the beginnings of which can be found in the writings of post-1848 Broad Churchmen J.F.D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, J.M. Ludlow and others, and a second wave in the High Anglicanism of Stewart Headlam of the 1870s and 1880s, was "the People's Archbishop", William Temple. The founding President of the Workers' Educational Association (in 1908) and accomplished Oxford philosophy don, Temple was a deep student of both Fabian Socialism and Marxism, attempting to work out a modern Christian social philosophy on the basis of Classic and Christian anthropology, and the sociological analyses developed by the secular thinkers. His *Essays in Christian Politics* (1927) set out his early thoughts on the matter, but his *Christianity and Social Order*, issued as a Penguin Special in 1942, just prior to his becoming Archbishop of Canterbury, was widely read and well-received. Partly conceived on the model of an earlier Penguin Special by the Christian Social and Ecumenist Bishop of Chichester, G.K.A. Bell, *Christianity and World Order* (1940), *Christianity and Social Order*, rather like C.S. Lewis' wartime "Broadcast Talks" (1941-1944), which were eventually published as *Mere*

Christianity, was, in effect, part of the Allied war effort to defeat the Axis Powers.

As Acorn was either trying to enlist in the Canadian Army, serving briefly in that body, recovering from his wounds in hospital in England, or being demobilized in Canada during the years of World War II, it seems unlikely that he would have been unaware of this Anglican social dimension of the British and Commonwealth propaganda campaign.

During the 1930s, and between 1941 and 1945, a movement even more sympathetic to Marxism, and specifically the Soviet Union, had emerged among the "Free Churches" and some Anglicans, the Christian Left, led by the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray, which viewed "the religious mission of the working class" to be the achievement of socialism. The most prominent Anglican representative of this line of thinking was the "Red Dean" of Canterbury Cathedral, Hewlett Johnson, whose sermons had long attacked (like Macmurray) "Idealist" elements in the Church. arguing for a "truly incarnational" (i.e. materialist) interpretation of the Christian evangel such as he thought Marxist-Leninists had unwittingly stumbled upon, and for a *rapprochement* between the equally-misled "separated brethren" of the Christian and Communist camps.

Johnson had been convinced of the essential identity of Christianity and Communism since before the Russian Revolution, and the Quaker Macmurray's books, widely read in the 1930s, confirmed his conflation of the "two faiths" (as he called them). Johnson's own essays on the subject, published by Putnam, *Christians and Communism*, appeared while Acorn was associating with Marxist-Leninist activists in Montreal in 1956, and again there is no particular reason to think that Acorn did not encounter this "fusion" (or perhaps,

rather, confusion) argument of the Christian Left at some point in the 1930s, '40s, or '50s, even if not from Macmurray's or Johnson's work directly.

As the case of Johnson and Macmurray shows, the problem, as I understand it, goes back to the circularity of German Identity-philosophy, since Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle a major component of British (and hence Anglican) Idealism and Romanticism, and, as Richard Bishirjian has shown, in his studies of Carlyle and T.H. Green, a species of modern gnosticism. Fortunately for Acorn, he encountered the work of two Anglican Romantics, Lewis and Grant, who had, in effect, differentiated the gnosticism in the tradition from thetrue gnosis of Christian faith and mystic philosophy. Hence, he too was partially successful in restoring his balance of consciousness, and exercising the prophetic function of the Church for his age and people, thus remaining (in the phrase of the historian and analyst of the Anglican Christian Social movement, Maurice B. Reckitt) still properly "militant here in earth."

III
WHITMAN DILATED AND LONGFELLOW EXTENDED: THE PROBLEM OF NORTH AMERICAN POETICAL/POLITICAL RELIGION

Milton Acorn had the great good fortune of being born, and having grown up, in North-East North America, for it is there that the human experiences occurred, beginning at the end of the North-West European "Dark Ages", that produced the two polities of Canada and the United States, with their respective national myths. However, it was also his unavoidable bad luck to have been born there, for it inevitably involved him in what Eric Voegelin calls "historiogenesis", the imaginative construction engaged in by a community to give itself ethical legitimacy over the time dimension. In the subordinate (in terms of power relations) position of Canada vis-à-vis the United States, Acorn's role in this regard must (whether consciously or not) be something of a "Whitman North" or "Longfellow of the Maritimes", as well as (as the poet himself recognized) "the Carl Sandburg of Canada". As such, the national mythopoetical function of Acorn, as People's Poet , was always in danger of being modelled on the personae and thought - worlds of the bards of Long Island and Maine, especially in the Canada of the latter part of the twentieth century, in which the original national consciousness was being replaced by one which, it was thought, could compete with that of the United States, by an exaggeration of the latter's secularized Puritan ethos, "out - Americaning the Americans", as it were. That this process might issue in a "poetical / political religion" of dubious value may by illustrated by an examination of an example of "poetical /

political religion" of American provenance now finding support in Canada (Toronto), admittedly on a small scale, and in post -Soviet Russia , the "Church Universal and Triumphant." This may be recognized as the latest name of the organization led by the late Elizabeth Clare Prophet (who died on October 15. 2009), which is currently headquartered in Montana. Founded in 1958 in Washington, D.C. by her husband, Mark L. Prophet (who died in February, 1973) as The Summit Lightouse, the Church Universal and Triumphant is an (unacknowledged by the parent body) offspring of the Bridge to Freedom "Ascended Master" Movement of the 1950s, itself the direct descendant of the "I AM Religious Activity" of Guy and Edna Ballard (who wrote under the names Godfré and Lotus Ray King) of the 1930s. The Ballards' sources included Frederick Spencer Oliver ("Phylos the Tibetan")'s occult novel, *A Dweller on Two Planets* (1894), (wherein a Chinese sage inducts the narrator into an order of Masters who live in Mount Shasta, California, who preserve the wisdom of the ages, who can travel to Venus, and who reveal to the narrator his previous incarnation in Atlantis), the "Great White Lodge" mythology of Madame Blavatsky, the geology of Colonel James Churchward' s books about the lost Pacific continent of Mu, Rosicrucianism, Christian Science, and 'the Swamis', as L. Sprague de Camp puts it, producing a literature, as he adds, at "the mental level of those comic-books whose covers show a muscular hero in a ballet-suit tearing a battleship asunder with his bare hands."

Sprague de Camp notes that Guy Ballard claims to have met his own Master, Saint Germain, on Mount Shasta (in 1930), recording his experiences with this figure (including long conversations, visits to the headquarters of the Brotherhood in the Teton Mountains, films of his previous

lives; e.g., as George Washington, accounts of the history of Atlantis, Mu and lost civilizations in the Sahara region and South America, and a visit from "Twelve Guests from Venus") in *Unveiled Mysteries* (Chicago, 1934) . In this and subsequent volumes (especially *The Magic Presence* and *The "I Am" Discourses*), widely distributed throughout the United States and Canada, the Ballards ("Kings") elaborated both upon the anthropology taught by the Saint (the unrealized power of the "Great God Within / Great Self Within"), and the politics it implies (the extolling of the "Mighty Seed of God's Eternal Manifestation ... America", " the Holy Grail" of history).

Although neither Sprague de Camp nor any of the other commentators on "Ballardism" note the staccato style of Saint Germain's revelations, and, eventually, the Ballards' own writing style (dashes sprinkle the text like a scattering of little landmines), the Ballards themselves are clear that this punctuation is supposed to represent the oracular nature of the expressions being recorded, and it is evident that it is associated with their anthropology of self-realization, much as the ellipses and dashes in the staccato lines of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass* are meant to indicate the utterings of the godded *prophetos*, a sequence of meditations that, as Malcolm Cowley pointed out, express via a kind of homegrown "heretical Hinduism" a "bumptious American nationalism." For the outpourings of the "Ascended Masters" through the Ballards are conceived of by them as "dictations" from the real rulers of the world, and their own ruminations "decrees" that express the "Divine Authority" that their own "higher self" (and potential Ascended Master) has by virtue of its creation by God "in His image".

When I first encountered Godfre Ray King's *Unveiled*

Mysteries in a second hand bookshop on Toronto's Front Street in 1956 or 1957, I was immediately reminded of the world-view that I had discovered in Desmond Leslie and George Adamski's *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, and in their footnotes and bibliography, particularly in the work of James Churchward and Alice Bailey (and her initiate informant, "The Tibetan"), and in the writings of Charles W. Leadbeater, and Annie Besant. Later investigations showed that Adamski had founded the "Royal Order of Tibet" in California in 1936, and that his published theosophical meditations of the 1930s later reappeared transferred from the mouths of the "Masters" to those of the "Space Brothers" in his "flying saucer" books of the 1950s. Indeed, Adamski's 1949 fictional *Pioneers of Space: A Trip to the Moon, Mars and Venus*, uses similar phraseology to his ostensibly factual *Inside the Spaceships* (1955), suggesting that the former is a "transitional work" (from theosophy to UFO religion).

A small group influenced by the I AM movement, Leslie and Adamski's *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, and older occult and theosophical sources, in fact became the subject of a famous sociological study in 1955, *When Prophecy Fails*. This academic work properly contextualized modern theosophical beliefs historically as developments out of the Christian apocalyptic and Hebraic prophetic traditions, and also alluded to possible political dimensions to apocalyptic-gnostic thinking of the sort that this group exhibited, noting an interest in the "mystical writings" of William Dudley Pelley, the American Fascist leader of the 1940s, and minor novelist.

These writings were presumably those produced by Pelley for "Soulcraft", the "spiritual" organization he set up in the 1940s after his release from internment during the Second

World War. Jacques Vallee notes that Pelley set up his "Silver Shirts", an American Nazi group, in 1932, the membership of which "overlapped strongly with Guy Ballard's 'I Am' movement." In 1950, he published *Starguests*, a compendium of automatic writing, and in that year, George Hunt Williamson (alias Michel d'Obrenovic), a collaborator with Adamski, is reported to have been employed by Pelley at the offices of "Soulcraft". Although Pelley died in 1965, "Soulcraft" survived under the leadership of Benn E. Lewis, a professional artist, in Washington D.C., guided by messages from the departed "Mr. Dudley" and other historical worthies, continuing into the 1970s. Pelley was presumably now an "Ascended Master" himself, having claimed to have had a vision of these world rulers on a mountain near Pasadena, California, in 1926, thus anticipating Ballard's encounter with Saint Germain by a few years.

Both the "Great I AM", and the Silver Legion of America had been strongly anti-Communist and anti-banker, and the latter overtly anti-Semitic and racist. Anti-Communism remained a tenable focus for American political gnosticism in the late 1950s, and this was still a component of the thought of the Summit Lighthouse founders when Mark L. Prophet and Elizabeth Prophet were "sent" to Washington by the Master El Morya in 1958 and 1961, respectively, but America's destiny, the world-historical horizons of which could be fully apprehended after World War II, was insufficiently expressed in the uncultivated rhetoric of a dilated Whitmanism, with its parochial American pride. Accordingly, Mark Prophet, with a similar Midwestern rustic background to the Ballards (he was from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, and they from Burlington, Iowa), was instructed by El Morya to name the new organization after Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow's poem (from "The Seaside and the Fireside"), "The Lighthouse." This is, perhaps, less surprising for a group that retained all the essential characteristics of the "I AM" anthropology if it is realized that Mark Prophet was revealed by El Morya to be a reincarnation of the cultured and "Europeanized" New England poet. This more international, sophisticated, and humanistically-educated American ethos was strengthened when Prophet was joined by his

"twin flame" (under the direction of Saint Germain and El Morya) in 1961, the young New Jersey-born German/Swiss-American graduate in Political Science from Boston University, and trainee in Christian Science practice, Elizabeth Clare Ytreberg (nee Wulf), recruited by the "Masters" as a female "messenger" replacement for Geraldine Innocenti of the Bridge to Freedom, who had committed suicide that year, and, as it turned out, as a replacement for Mark Prophet himself (all this according to the Summit Lighthouse/Church Universal and Triumphant official *Heilsgeschichte*, of course).

According to Elizabeth Clare Prophet, the surname of her late husband, Mark, whom she married in 1963 was "carried... from France to Ireland to Canada" by his ancestors, and his biographer, Annice Booth, notes that an important early "dictation from Jesus" (to found the healing "Brotherhood of Gethsemane") came to him "in London, Ontario, Canada in 1962." No significance is given to these "Canadian connections" in the literature of the Prophet movement, but links to both Whitman (whose London, Ontario, friend, Dr. R.M. Bucke, was the author of the theosophical classic *Cosmic Consciousness*) and Longfellow (whose birth-state of Maine has historically been a contested territory between the Canadian and American versions of

North America) are suggested.

Today, the Church Universal and Triumphant is governed by a Board, and its Montana headquarters, established by Mrs. Prophet, continues to disseminate the teachings of the Masters, using the liturgy, "decrees" (reminiscent of Kabbalistic "adjurations" or Renaissance Neo-Platonic "angel conjuring"), "dictations" (from the Masters), or printed books and "Pearls of Wisdom" (weekly letters of instruction) recorded by Mark and/or Elizabeth Prophet during their "messenger-ship". Since it has been revealed that in previous incarnations, Mark was a young Russian potential leader who died shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, and Elizabeth was Elizabeth of Austria (1837-1898), murdered by the anarchist Luigi Luccheni, the Church has developed a following in Eastern Europe, (much of the group's literature now being translated into Russian), presumably becoming a focus for the reestablishment of aradically conservativeideology in the realms of the post-Soviet bloc countries.

As has already been suggested, a possibility for an extended Longfellowism also exists in Canada, especially as one of the "retreats" of the Great White Brotherhood is said by the Church to be located in Canada ("From his retreat on the etheric plane above Banff, Alberta, Canada,... the Archangel Michael... goes forth into all the world with his legions of blue-lightning angels to protect the children of light and preserve freedom on earth."). Perhaps such a fundamentally poetic proposition will inspire the ideological seekers of a "New Canada" (of Left, Right or Centre) to decisive action. One might certainly worry about that.

An Occasional paper distributed at the Purdy Country Literary Festival, Marmora, Ontario, July 31, 2010 .

IV

"Foreword" to *In a Springtime Instant: The Selected Poems of Milton Acorn 1950-1986*, (edited by James Deahl), Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2012 pp. I-II

This book is the result of a chance encounter at the Small Presses Book Fair in Toronto in June, 2008. I was there promoting my collections of essays relating to Milton Acorn, when a visitor to my table introduced himself as Joe Rosenblatt, Acorn's old political comrade-at-arms. I told Joe that I had been very impressed by his recognition of Acorn as fundamentally a mystic, a comment he had made in his collection of essays and reflections, *The Lunatic Muse*.

In subsequent discussions during Joe's same visit to Toronto, he told me that for some years he had been trying to interest publishers in bringing out a new edition of Acorn's work, as Acorn had been his poetic mentor, and because the Acorn corpus was now largely out of print, scattered in obscure volumes, and generally ignored by the literary opinion-forming classes. I immediately thought of James Deahl, who had been a close friend, and, indeed, flatmate of Acorn's during the latter's final years in Toronto before he returned to Prince Edward Island, where he died. Deahl had edited and/or published most of the posthumous editions of Acorn's work, and I believed he might be interested in such a project from the editorial point of view, and I thought Howard Aster, of Mosaic Press, might like to publish it.

These hunches proved to be correct. Over the next few years of meetings, emails, letters and phone calls, facilitated by the participation of Mike Walsh of Mosaic Press, Joyce Wayne, Acorn scholar, and former Acorn publishing colleague, Chris Faiers, poet and longtime Acorn friend and supporter, and poet, Anna Yin, and, most importantly, with the gracious help of Mary Hooper, Milton Acorn's sister, the project emerged as this book. James Deahl's chief editorial criterion for this new "Acorn selected" is, as he makes clear in his helpful introduction, literary quality. Emphasizing the quality of Acorn's work, Deahl is able to de-emphasize the rhetorical extremes that most commentators suggest mar Acorn's writing. Earlier editors tended to present Acorn's poetry in a fragmented, over-schematized, or narrowly topical way, detracting from the general sweep of the poet's vision. Acorn's vision is both coherent and consistent over time, although drawn, as Deahl argues, from a diversity of ideological and philosophical sources. Thus, there is a clear philosophical intention or a set of "spiritual experiences" of a mystic or "Gnostic" nature, (as philosopher Eric Voegelin might have put it), which animates Acorn's poetry throughout.

What these spiritual experiences were, and of what relevance their expression in poetry might have for Canada or the world, are now questions for Acorn scholars. For ordinary readers, both old and new, *In a Springtime Instant* presents a fresh and detailed map of the mind of Milton Acorn.

Humber College, Toronto
May 26, 2011

V
MILTON ACORN'S SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Towards the end of my "Foreword" to the new Mosaic Press "Acorn Selected", edited by James Deahl, I suggest that the poet had "a clear philosophical intention", evident throughout his work, based upon "a set of 'spiritual experiences' of a mystic or 'Gnostic' nature", borrowing the terminology of political philosopher, Eric Voegelin. As Deahl notes in his helpful "Introduction" to the book, Acorn, while widely read in the literature of Marxism-Leninism, modern English-language Canadian and Western poetry, and the Confederation poets of nineteenth-century Canada, also was a lifelong believing High Anglican, and an admirer of the seventeenth-century Metaphysical Poets, Canadian Anglican thinker, George Grant, and the Irish Anglican Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis. As I have argued elsewhere, such an apparently (by contemporary standards) contradictory collection of "progressive" and "conservative" allegiances was by no means uncommon in the Canada of Acorn's youth, and, indeed, in the Anglican, and other Christian communions, worldwide in the nineteen-thirties and forties. As this climate of opinion, which combined the attitudes and symbolism of Socialism and traditional Christianity, both of which are now in eclipse, is largely unfamiliar to most people today, it is perhaps useful to look behind the symbolisms of Socialism and Christianity at the spiritual experiences that generated them, thus perhaps bringing alive again the thought-world within which Acorn apparently moved.

I chose Voegelin's critical concepts of "mystic" and "Gnostic" to try to penetrate to an understanding of the

spiritual experiences of Acorn because for this German-American political philosopher these related, but distinguishable, terms describe structures of consciousness that underlie modern political ideas and movements, the roots of which (as historians of political thought know) are traceable to the Carolingian Era of the early Middle Ages in North-West Europe, the only partly well-described "Dark Ages".

To relate Voegelin's "mystic" and "Gnostic" terminology to Acorn's thought may seem far-fetched, but this language was certainly familiar to High Anglican poets with whose work the young Acorn, and the co-religionists of his youth, could have been very well-acquainted, such as Evelyn Underhill and Charles Williams, the"Inkling" and friend of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R.Tolkien. Both Underhill and Williams were lay theologians and scholars as well as poets, popular writers, and High Church mystics, and both had been members ofA .E. Waite's "Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross" or its predecessor, Waite's version of the Isis-Urania Temple (in London) of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, set up to promote practical occultism and ritual magic.

As Francis King, the historian of ritual magic in England notes, Waite, an American-born Roman Catholic-raised Golden Dawn member, "remained suspicious of the order, however, for at heart he was always a mystic rather than a magician..." (*Ritual Magic in England:1887 to the Present Day*, p. 42). Underhill, after her "graduation" from Waite's Isis-Urania, went on to become the author of widely-read historical studies of mysticism; Williams, after about five years in Waite's later Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, left it to write his seven "supernatural thrillers", his modern Arthurian poetic cycle, and his "Romantic theology", in all of

which the aims and outcomes of ritual magic are contrasted with the intentions and results of the rituals of the religion of love, which he characterized as *magia* (white magic) rather than *goetia* (the magic of self-will, or sorcery).

As participants in the nineteenth-century Occult Revival, or at least, participant-observers in its Edwardian sequel, Underhill and Williams had first-hand experience of the various aspects of that structure of consciousness, and their practical social implications. Interestingly, in her 1913 book *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins*, Underhill anticipates Voegelin's analytical categories of "mystic" and "Gnostic", developed by him in the 1940s in his *History of Political Ideas* to help understand the intellectual origins of the modern ideological movements. In effect, Underhill identifies both the "mystic" consciousness and the "Gnostic" experience with the human psychological function of transcendence, but sees the first (the mystic) experience as its opening to the Beyond, but the second (the Gnostic) as a closure against the Beyond, as in the "mystery" cults of the late Classical world, and their successors, the Gnostic systems. In short, the Gnostic error is characterized by Underhill as an occlusion or stopping up of the mystical opening of the mind, a sort of losing of "the mystic way" of her book's title.

An example of the presence of both the "mystic" and "Gnostic" structures of consciousness, thus defined, in Acorn's work, particularly clearly expressed, and juxtaposed with one another, is found in his poem "Knowing I Live in a Dark Age", first published in *Jawbreakers* (1963). Acorn's basic perception in this poem (i.e., that he knows that he lives "in a dark age") is a product of what Voegelin calls "mystic philosophy", or the "classic experience of reason", which

underlies all ethical thought, but which is most clearly articulated in Classic Platonic and Christian philosophy. In Acorn's poem, however, this fundamental ethical experience derails into an imaginary ideological history under the influence, consecutively, of experiences of what Voegelin calls "metastatic faith", the apocalyptic consciousness, and the "Gnostic" or syncretistic movement of mind.

That the underlying understanding of the poet, Acorn, is that of "faith" (*pistis*) in the Christian sense is clear from the central constructive image of the poem, which forms the basis for the "message" that the poet has about the "darkness" of the present time "before history":

> The crows mobbing the blinking, sun-stupid owl;
> wolves eating a hamstrung calf hindend first,
> keeping their meat alive and fresh ... these
> are marks of foresight, beginnings of wit:
> but Jesus wearing thorns and sunstroke
> beating his life and death into words
> to break the rods and blunt the axes of Rome:
> this and like things followed.
>
> (*In a Springtime Instant,* p. 37)

For those familiar with the New Testament (as Acorn was), this might be read as a gloss on the hope of St. Paul, rooted in his faith in the universal meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus, expressed in his letter to the early Roman Christians as follows:

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of god. For the creature was

made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who had subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." (Romans 8:18-22, King James Version)

For Acorn, the Pauline hope, rooted in faith, becomes "metastatic" or is transformed by the Romantic "productive imagination" into a "visionary faith", which is transferred from the experiences of the Jesus of the Gospels (which are viewed as symbolic) to history, yet to emerge, and known now only apocalyptically (as a revelation). Like faith, though, apocalypse is unsatisfactory as an answer to the miseries of the present "dark age" for the poet living in "this advertising rainbow", whose poems only "show pale bayonets of grass waving thin on dunes; the paralytic and his lyric secrets", so a "history, which is yet to begin", which "will exceed this, exalt this" must be synthesized and intuited as knowledge (*gnosis*), becoming the "new reality" that acts "as a poem that erases and rewrites its poet."

For those familiar with Marxist thought, and its Hegelian basis, these three stages of Acorn's poetic evocation of an imaginary future history (in which ordinary commonsense history disappears), which in Voegelinian terms we described as "metastatic faith", apocalyptic, and gnosticism, are, of course, equivalent to the three "moments" of the "dialectic", which Marx himself understood to involve internal contradiction, and circularity of thought (Marx believed that he had escaped the latter by understanding the "dialectical" process as naturalistic, and thus merely descriptive of the movement of matter, rather than an "idealist" construction).

For Voegelin, such a full-blown Gnostic politics combines

the "teleological" intuition of a "progress" in human experience with the "axiological" apprehension of the presence of a "state of perfection", producing an "activist mysticism", the complete deformation of mystic consciousness, the "ideology" (to use the modern term). The cultural setting which has been most productive of this "loss of balance of consciousness", Voegelin thinks, has been the Christian civilizational field, and specifically the prophetic impulse within that field, deriving from the Hebrew prophetic tradition.

"Knowing I Live in a Dark Age" is one of Acorn's most prophetic poems, both in the conventional sense of a "foretelling" (as in the lines "history yet to begin, will exceed this, exalt this"), and in the more properly theological sense of a "forthtelling" (as in his comment on his "friend Al (Purdy), union builder and cynic", who hesitates "to believe hisown delicate poems lest he believe in something better than himself .").

Put perhaps rather over-schematically, Voegelin sees the problem of the degeneration of Christianity into competing prophetologies as deriving from the separation of dogmatic and mystical theologies quite early in Church history, implying that the solution lies in their reunion. In my view, while Acorn often exhibits a quite intense experience of the Gnostic problem in his writing (as we have seen in "Knowing I Live in a Dark Age", for example), he also sometimes expresses quite clearly its solution, as in the following passage from "What I Know of God", with which I will close :

> What I know of God is this:
> That He has hands, for He touches me.

...
All I ask is ... Keep on existing
Keeping Your hands. Continue to touch me.
(*In a Springtime Instant*, p.151)

A paper presented at the sixth annual Purdy Country Literary Festival at the William Shannon Room of the Marmora Public Library, August 4, 2012.

VI
ACORN AND THE CHE MYTH

Shortly after the death of Che Guevara in 1967, a biography of this hero of the Cuban Revolution appeared which differed from most of the writing about the guerrilla leader published at the time. This was Daniel James' *Che Guevara* (1969), which deliberately set out to explode what its author believed was a growing international cult surrounding the late revolutionary's life, death and exploits. While obviously written from the point of view of an American social-democratic journalist and anti- Communist, the book was thoroughly researched and closely argued (as might be expected), and its author was at pains to detail parallels to aspects of Guevara's thought in the Marxist-Leninist tradition and its antecedents, and in plausible cultural influences (e.g. the Jesuits and Don Quixote), in an effort to explain both his subject's undeniable wide appeal, and ultimate failure (as James takes it) in terms of the structure of his character. In his final chapter ("Does Ché Live?"), James brings this analysis to a focus in a discussion of the guerrilla tradition in Latin America, and, in a brief mention, to the Nicaraguan, Augusto "Cesar" Sandino, the anti-U.S. imperialist guerrilla of the early part of the twentieth century, "whose ideas were closer perhaps to Ché's thought and style" than those of any other Latin American predecessor, as James puts it. However, here, just at the point where the reader expects a revelation of the sources of Guevara's extensions of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, noted by James throughout the book, the author drops this line of inquiry and no more is heard of Sandino, or of his ideas. Both Ché's extensions of Marxism-Leninism, and Sandino's ideas (which fused

elements of Marxism-Leninism with theosophy, millennialism, Masonic lore, and nationalism) constitute a "spirituality" (in Ché, expressed in *Socialism and Man in Cuba*, for example, as James acknowledges). The "Ché Myth" (in any sense of the latter word), it would seem, thus needs to be analysed spiritually; i.e., from a "religious" point of view.

As scholars are agreed, Sandino's "religion", in which he came to understand himself and his movement as manifestations of a new humanity, returns modern political ideology to its roots in the apocalyptic-Gnostic movements of early modernity, a development which facilitated the spread of these ideologies in the so-called "underdeveloped" world. Sandino's life and martyrdom at the hands of a U.S.-backed military regime became paradigmatic not simply for Latin American revitalization and revolutionary movements, but internationally; when the Guomintang (Chinese Nationalists) entered Beijing in 1928, one of their divisions was named after Sandino, and the Nicaraguan guerrilla leader was a hero to the interwar U.S. Peace Movement, for example. As is well known, a revival of interest in Sandino in the 1960s accompanied the rise of "Third World" socialisms, the development of the "New Left", and the emergence of new international socialist heroes, such as Guevara himself, who combined nationalism and socialism.

The Canadian "People's Poet", Milton Acorn, whose apogee as a writer and public figure occurred in the 1960s and early '70s, captures this new-old socialist spirit, in its form as *guevarismo*, in his poems about Ché, two of which appear in the new Deahl edition of Acorn's selected poetry from Mosaic Press. Acorn's own combination of Marxist-Leninist, Canadian nationalist, Gnostic, and Christian structures of consciousness makes him the perfect vehicle for the recovery

and understanding of the full amplitude of the "Ché myth", as expressed, for example, in these lines from his "Where Is Che Guevara?" (published in 1969):

> These are miraculous days...Worms sing! The sound
> from their burrows is as lively as birds
> but not so pleasant. And right now they are singing
> "Where is Che Guevara?"
>
> Che is beauty… The terrible and persistent beauty
> that's the end of those who can't stand it,
> The end of worms.
>
> (*In a Springtime Instant*, p. 113)

CHAPTER 3
FROM VICO TO PICO:
NEW PATHS FOR PEOPLE'S POETRY

I

The surprise election of Stéphane Dion as the new leader of the Liberal Party of Canada (over favoured Establishment candidates) might have been taken as signalling a reprieve for the remnants of Canadian liberal nationalist populism, but that impression has proven to be chimeric. This is because the "globalization" (i.e. Americanization) of Canada continues inexorably, with the country's two chief constellations of political opinion (the

The author with Anna YinCourtesy Anna Yin and Anna Plesums, RaymondSouster Symposium, Purdyfest2011

Conservative and Liberal Parties) transforming themselves into the Republican and Democratic Parties North respectively. For just as shrewd strategists in the Conservative ranks have seen the necessity, in building a national party, of showing some affection for the French and British North American pasts of Canada, so Liberal Party activists, in a time of Party disarray, have offered obeisance instinctively to their Rouge/Grit roots.

The process of continental integration taking place beneath the surface is better reflected in the realm of changes in political culture, the most obvious, perhaps, being the broad acceptance of a Commons motion designating the Québecois as a nation within Canada, betraying a non-recognition that the historical basis for national unity, and, indeed, the existence of the country, has been united resistance to the imperial "pull from the South". The disintegrating effects of this "pull" have been felt in all sectors of Canadian society during the last ninety years, particularly intensely since the 1960s, and this includes in the field of poetry and poetics. Events in the circles of the Canadian Poetry Association have illustrated this disintegrative dynamic, but have also pointed up a philosophical opportunity that the passage of People's Poetry *per se* holds out.

The directions of the fragmentation in this case are more instructive than in Canadian popular culture in general in that People's Poetry reverts to the historically Janus-faced consciousness of the early eighteenth century, exemplified by the "poetic wisdom" of the obscure Neapolitan academic, Giambattista Vico. The collapse of this ideological structure, as is the case with the dispersal of any of the ideological fogs or "Second Realities", as Eric Voegelin has called the movements of modernity, reveals its historical precondition,

and in this case the Renaissance comes into view, a very mixed cultural process that affected Western Europe from at least the twelfth century through the sixteenth. A microcosm and focus of this development, according to many commentators, was the thought of Italian philosopher and scholar Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), who, in his person, combined an understanding of (or, at least, affinity for) Humanism, "Christian Cabala", Aristotelian philosophy, the "Neoplatonism" (with its Hermetic background) of the Ficinian Academy, Florentine civic millennarianism, and the proto-Protestantism of Savonarola, while also undertaking a strenuous defence of medieval Scholasticism. Perhaps partly because of his short life, Giovanni Pico was, like the Italian Renaissance as a whole, unable to achieve a "re-ordering of the soul" (so to speak) to replace the medieval synthesis achieved in the wake of Augustine, and this eclectic culture of "bits and bobs" was the legacy inherited by the ideologists of Enlightenment, and those, like Vico, who tried to sort out the mess.

Giovanni Pico's goal (possibly never achieved) was to work out a "poetic theology", but echoes of his project descended to the Romantics. A group of former Canadian Poetry Association members in the Guelph (Central Ontario) area seems to be pursuing this aspect of the legacy in a series of seasonally-inspired chapbook collections of Confederation and contemporary Canadian poetry, edited by Katherine L. Gordon. The Toronto Chapter of the Canadian Poetry Association, which has now evolved into the happily (although coincidentally) named Toronto Renaissance Conspiracy, has produced two anthologies of its members' highly individualistic (but carefully collectively crafted) poetry, edited by Diane Mascherin, thus following the path of

the Pican version of Humanism. The Canadian Poetry Association itself, now effectively centred around Moncton, New Brunswick, and in the Maritime Provinces, is still defending, through its journal *Poemata* and at conferences, the pan-Canadian liberal nationalist poetic populism that was the original cement for the People's Poetry movement, and that reverts historically (like modern nationalism as a whole) to the civic millennarianism of Renaissance Europe, carried too, as has been noted, by Pico.

But what of the serious philosophical concern of Pico's project, touching as it did, the question of "mystic philosophy" that he, along with many other Renaissance thinkers, thought should be engaged at the intersection between Classic and Christian (medieval) mysticism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism and Gnosticism, and Platonic and Neoplatonic thought? What of his interest in (as he might have put it) "restoring order in the soul through poetry"? This central aspect of Pico's project was analogous to the primary focus of Milton Acorn, Canada's People's Poet, in the last decade of his life, and to a major theme in the work of Acorn's disciple, the Toronto People's Poet, the late Ted Plantos, a founding member of the Canadian Poetry Association. Political philosopher Eric Voegelin has pointed out that the Renaissance effort failed in this, its most important, task, but that the job remains to be done. Will contemporary Canadian poets, freed from the ideological dream-worlds constructed by their well-meaning mentors, be up to it?

II

Psychic Psychology: A Review of Melanie Martin, *The Crash of Flight 105: A Psychic Journey to the Truth*, (Brighton, Ontario, Canada): Hidden Brook Press, 2006

After the death of my aunt, an anti-aircraft gunner, in 1943, and my father, an RAF Bomber Command navigator in 1944, my grandmother took an interest in what was called then "Spiritualism", attending séances in order to try to get in touch with her departed daughter and son-in-law, "on the other side". As for many others at the time, the tremendous shock for a spiritually sensitive person (as I know she was) of the loss, in quick succession, of two young much-loved family members, led to a certain crisis in her conventional Christian faith (from which she recovered later), and a receptivity to the "alternative gospel" of Spiritualism being promoted by British Air Chief Marshal Lord Dowding, for example, in his best-selling *Many Mansions* (1945).

I naturally thought of these aspects of my own family history when reading Melanie Martin's sensitive and apparently utterly frank account of her spiritual and emotional turmoil on the unexpected death, shortly after her marriage, of her commercial pilot husband, and of her attempt to regain her equilibrium, and to clear her husband's name with regard to his culpability in the crash, through attention to "psychic readings" she had received over the years. The result of this analysis, which she admits involved taking "a chance" and trusting "my inner self" with its "feelings and vibrations within", (p. 151), is, of course, the book, a journal-like account of her feelings, psychic experiences, and associations of events, names, dates, places etc. , to which a selection of

Ms. Martin's poems on similar themes is appended. The "truth" of the title is thus not simply what she considers the confirmation of her husband's innocence, and her suspicion of a "cover-up" involving shoddy aircraft maintenance and parts supply, but also the affirmation of herself provided by the writing and publication of the story: "Yet one thing for sure (*sic*) I have experienced the unexplained and pieced a story ever so cleverly together and I have created a masterpiece within my mind." (p. 118)

Ms. Martin's clarity and candour about the subjectivity and circularity of the mental processes and states she has experienced in the course of her spiritual saga, causing her to reflect, perhaps, to herself "I am either psycho or psychic" (p. 85), throws considerable light upon the structure of consciousness of the psychic that is usually obscured in more sophisticated presentations, dressed up as they often are with the furniture of "the etheric (astral) plane", "controls", "cosmic consciousness" etc. Quite different from the classic mystic "participation in" or "union with" the divine of religious or philosophical transcendence, which produces order in the soul, and its opening to the order of the universe, the Gnostic experience Ms. Martin describes encloses the self further within itself, constructing a "higher self" or "overself" (to use the traditional language) which inhabits an imaginary universe; as Ms. Martin puts it towards the end of her meditation "I believe the choices (in life) are somehow prearranged beforehand within our soul…I also believe in trusting thy inner self and all which surrounds me in my writings…I love the thought of spirits within our own universe…Though my loss of Danny (her husband) shook my foundation, his loss gave me great strength and courage to go forth and follow my inner self… I trust my inner self more

than anyone else in the world." (pp. 114-117)

The casual reader of *The Crash of Flight 105* may, at first, be puzzled as to the "point" of the book, particularly because of its "stream of consciousness" method of composition in which the author constantly restates her essentially solipsistic perspective, but a more careful linear reading reveals a sort of "argument", drawn perhaps from the predestinarian Calvinist theology in which she was presumably raised (she was brought up in the Presbyterian Church). This seems to be that there is a *deus absconditus* (a God that is far away), but that His will can be known in the interactions of the soul or Self with the spirits of the intermediary world (angels, the spirits of the departed etc.), a Providence that is evident in the details of one's life, which, of course, thus become the will of the absent and unknowable divinity. This is more or less just Puritanism, the British and American version of the "Rhineland theology" of the late Middle Ages, that, as a battery of authors in this "Golden Age of scholarship" on the subject has shown, provided the basis for both Lutheran and Reformed philosophical anthropology and the political ideologies of modernity, and that is linked to the Hermetic Gnostic theosophy of such Renaissance figures as Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola , the author of the famous "Oration on the Dignity of Man", a large place in the thought-world of whom was taken up with the question of "angel-conjuring" (what we might call "psychic politics").

The modern Spiritualist movement, which began in the nineteenth century during the era of the decay of New England Puritan theology into its Hermetic Gnostic and Millennarian components, eventually produced a Theosophical "church"(founded by Madame Blavatsky and others in New York in 1875), a "psychic philosophy"

(perhaps articulated best by Stanley de Brath in his book of that name), and more recently a plethora of "channelled" manifestoes of "psychic politics", such as Jane Roberts' "thoughts of Chairman Seth." Ms. Martin's *Crash of Flight 105*, in effect, adds a "psychic psychology" to the growing literature by and about the Spiritualist Movement, giving us a clear insight into the structure of consciousness that is attracted to contemporary manifestations of what the Renaissance called "angel magic".

III

Imagining Links: A Review of S.C.James, *The Bridge*, (Thornhill, Ontario): Poetry Friendly Press, 2007 21 pp.

"May the bridge be wide. I would cross it without hesitation [literally, doubt]."
-Manichaean prayer from Central Asia

This poetic meditation on consciousness and its construction and reconstruction of language and the world, and thereby itself, using the image of the bridge, is reminiscent of the long tradition of spiritual speculation, originating in Indo-Iranian mythology, and developed in Zoroastrianism, Manichaean thought, and sectarian Islam, that sought to alleviate the anxiety intrinsic to human existence by expanding knowledge of the mysterious and dangerous "Bridge of the Separator", or judgement after death, an approach to the problem of being which was further articulated in later Western philosophy and psychology, beginning around the ninth century C.E., and continuing on to Nietzsche and Freud.

In eight highly complex poems, which express the stages of his experience of the growth of an inner consciousness of "the bridge of mental interconnections" (p. 2), S. C. James shows how "escape from condemnation towards a greater hope", offering "a new beginning which supports failing virtue" (pp.1-2), can be achieved by "Obeying Oneself" (the title of the final item in the sequence), so that "The Bridge" (the title of the first poem) which is initially created (or perhaps recreated) in "an individual who has all the right answers and all the right questions" and who can turn "inward to seek occurrences of behavior which shows (*sic*)

compassion and innate self-forgiveness."(pp. 19, 20). On the other hand, the author makes clear that despite this achievement of psychic "bridging" via psycho-dramatic analysis, "the mind senses being fallible", leading to the conclusion, in a final meditation, that a perspective has emerged here that "allows something more free and something that overrides initial ideas and applications with a clearer understanding of oneself", (p. 21), a release from the circularity and ethical confusion of the Gnostic "dialectic", and a dawning of the mystic experience of the source of "what is sound and reasonable" (p. 20).

*The Bridge*needs to be carefully crossed and recrossed by the reader. It is both exploratively wide, and normatively narrow.

A Collection of Remnants: A Review of S.C.James, *Ephemera and Derivations*, Thornhill, Ontario: The Ontario Poetry Society (A Beret Days Book), 2010 53pp.

American poet Robert Bly has stated that "the tradition in which I find the most nourishment" is one "going from the ancient mystics through the Gnostics, through the people of brotherly love...to (psychologist Carl Gustav) Jung." As American poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth has noted, this historical Gnostic tradition was a product of the mixing of disparate elements left over from the uprooting of local cults and rites by the old ecumenic empires of Persia, Greece and Rome, and was "more than almost any other religious system, because it is of all others, the most invented, the most 'made up', an institutionalized panorama of what Jung has called the Collective Unconscious ... a sort of socially therapeutic dream."

As was clear, I think, from S.C. James' previous short volume of poems *The Bridge* (2007), he, too, is engaging with

the Gnostic tradition, but, I believe, with perhaps a clearer grasp of its relevance for contemporary problems than Bly or Rexroth. For they both seem to judge that gnosticism is still present in the modern world as an only peripheral or subterranean cultural phenomenon (as Theosophy, Occultism etc.), whereas, as political philosopher Eric Voegelin and his followers have convincingly shown (for half a century) "modernity is the growth of gnosticism", (to cite Voegelin), a perspective that James appears to share (on the evidence of this latest, more extensive, assemblage of poetic reflections).

In *Ephemera and Derivations*, the poet sets out "the obvious and the half-completed that seems a collection of remnants but which is in fact somewhere to start" ("Text Book and Poetry" p. 47), as he notes towards the end of the book, but from the first, his meditations have had the intent of penetrating the ideological systems that surround him: "Thought strives for a greater intrusion into signs and philosophies, the chain of events, the already sustained derivations." (*Ephemera and Derivations,* p.1). Breaking through the wall of disassociated dogmas and ideological clichés must be the work of the poet-philosopher in the current chaotic "climate of opinion" (in Whitehead's phrase), and James expresses a similar insight throughout this collection, perhaps best articulated in "Truth Amidst the Wreckage" (p.8) :"As if gathered together, the constituents of the realized whole were assembled in such a way that the untruth on the spoken lie were observed for what they were- being irrelevant to any kind of meaning- thus giving room for honest assertions while rejecting what is facile or negligible."

The poet's "search of the Ground" (as Voegelin describes the operation), is successful for James, as he declares "Poetical wonders captured forever- courage, fortitude, love,

revenge, tragedy, comedy or histories and biographies… something undoubtedly original or definitely concerned with what modernity may only hold cheap and irrelevant." ("Text Book and Poetry", p. 50). Thus "one achieves a certain balance from the stable ground of the mind's initial constructions." ("Again", p. 53).

Penetrating the Problems of Post-Modern Narcissism: A Review of *Zombie's Paradise* by S.C. James, Toronto: The Ontario Poetry Society (a Beret Days Book), 2013 47 pp. "(Narcissus is) calling forth echoes while disdaining their origin." Spanish poet Luis de Gongora, 1561-1627

In this new collection of contemplative verse, S.C. James addresses a perennial theme for philosophers and poets, particularly since the Renaissance- how does one assert the freedom of the individual person without confusing the results of the will's activity (its "reflections") with human being itself ? In the 1930s, this issue could still be described (in Classical terms) as a "dilemma" (as by French philosopher Louis Lavelle), and in the 1970s, American social critic Christopher Lasch was able to successfully reformulate the matter on the basis of modern ideological systems (Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism), using their origins in fringe Judaeo-Christian and Classical thought as a source of some moral compass. Since the collapse of the ideologies in the "post-modern" period, however, the self and the self's images have been declared indistinguishable by the Western opinion-forming classes, a situation resembling, in some respects, that of pre-philosophical ancient societies. The latter do exhibit a clear sense of the problem of narcissism, though, as made clear by Wade Davis in his 1980s study of the punitive function of zombification among the Bizango *vodoun* cult of Haiti, for example.

As Davis discovers, for the practitioners of Bizango, zombification (as in the case of one , Clairvius Narcisse), involves both the physical (via chemicals) and spiritual (via magic) "death" and "resurrection" of the overweening individual, a fate to be feared in oneself (rather than as with the Hollywood zombie, a condition to be feared in others).

In the poetic sequence *Zombie's Paradise*, S.C. James recognizes that "the modern malaise" is being "over-conscious" (p.15), a situation in which

The mind has no choice but to meet the challenge of a shady deal.

(p.33, "A Shady Deal")

The book suggests, to this reader at least, that the inevitable "shady deal" in the contemporary Post-Modernist intellectual chaos, involves the acceptance of the passage into the land of "shades" by means of linguistic sorcery (as outlined in the concluding, and title, poem of the book, pp.44-47), where one "recovers one's sense of the spirit of space" (p.46), after a process detailed in the earlier poems in the cycle, a procedure analogous to that described by philosopher of consciousness Eric Voegelin as replacing "reflective identity" with "reflective distance", allowing openness to the transcendent .

Zombie's Paradiseoffers
a challenging poetic penetration of the
problems of Post-Modern narcissism,
and their possible solution.

IV
RESTORING THE MOSAIC'S MARBLES
A report on the fourth Controversy of Poets, Public Library, Marmora, Ontario, August 4, 2007.

He sat upon a marble sepulchre
Massive and huge, where at the Monarch's feet
The righteous Baly had his Judgement-seat
A Golden Throne before them vacant stood;
Three human forms sustain'd its ponderous weight,
With lifted hands outspread, and shoulders bow'd
Bending beneath the load

Robert Southey, "The Curse of Kehama"(xxiii)(14)

Long considered, with the rest of Robert Southey's "epics", to be bad poetry, and largely irrelevant to the canon of English High Romanticism, this Hindu-inspired spiritual tale by the colleague and friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth may offer, along with others of his similar productions, such as "Madoc" (1805), about a Welsh prince who, legend asserts, voyaged to the New World about 1170 A.D., and "Roderick, the last of the Goths" (1814), a few helpful clues in understanding the genesis of the modern Canadian "mosaic" identity, and thus of Canadian People's Poetry, after the War of 1812. For, of course, in its second avatar (the first being New France) before the Age of Ideology, Canada was British North America, conceived of in 1791, but not realized until the test of arms of 1812-1814 that united the multi-national Loyalist refugees from the Thirteen Colonies with French Canadians, First Nations, and settlers from the British Isles against the expansionism of the United States (under the aegis, of course, of the Mercantilist British

Empire). It was thus highly appropriate that the fourth in the series of Controversies of Poets, originally conceived by the late AI Purdy and Hamilton, Ontario poet James Deahl to discuss the present state and possible future of People's Poetry in Canada, should have been held at Marmora on what is known in Toronto as Simcoe Day weekend. For it was in the area of Marmora (named for the many marble outcroppings in the vicinity, and particularly for the huge marble rock found on Crowe Lake there) and the adjoining township of Madoc, named for Southey's prince, that the Upper Canadian mining industry (in the latter case eventually involving gold) first developed in the 1820s, and it is this area of the Canadian Shield, stretching down into the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence lowlands, that Purdy writes of so poignantly in "The Country North of Belleville" as "the country of our defeat", a frustration of the subsistence- farming, resource-extraction, and local industrial efforts of Purdy's "degenerate Loyalist" ancestors, well symbolizing the downfall of the vision of Canada of Lieutenant-General John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper

Canada (Ontario), by mid-twentieth century.

The focus of this fourth Controversy was the spiritual underpinnings of People's Poetry, an emphasis derived from the deliberations of the previous three discussions, which had concluded that populist poetry's attachment to ideological movements (particularly socialism) was no longer viable because of the disintegration of these movements. This, too, made Marmora an ideal locale for these further reflections, as "the country north of Belleville" (mid-Hastings County) has become in recent decades the site of many and varied "retreats" for the renewal of spiritual experience, from Roman Catholic Marian Place, near Marmora, to the Esotericist

Bartonian Metaphysical Society school near Madoc, thus functioning somewhat as "the country south of Belleville" (such as around Consecon, where the originators of the nineteenth-century Spiritualist Movement, the Fox sisters, were born) did in an earlier age.

As in Southey's quasi-Hindu Romantic epic, where Yamen (Yama), the King of the Dead, a sort of spirit of human history, sits above the judgement seat of Baly (Bali), the demon who rules the world through ethical systems and will, so the three speakers on the spiritual foundations of People's Poetry at the Marmora controversy were preceded by an account of People's Poetry's past, delivered by Hamilton poet Jeff Seffinga. Entitled "Poetry in Performance: Oral Tradition and the Roots of People's Poetry", Seffinga's paper outlined an historical sociology of poetry in general, and populist poetry in particular, detailing the origins in the early tribal life of the peoples of Northwest Europe of "the authority of the bard" in the memorializing and entertaining function of the office, and its transmission through the Dark Ages (e.g. in *Beowulf*) and the Middle Ages (e.g. in the Arthurian corpus) to Shakespeare and the later poets of the common man, such as RobertBurns and John Clare, and of nationalism, Romanticism, and democracy (at least in part), such as Wordsworth, Whitman, and the Canadian Confederation Poets. Noting that similar cultural developments to the ones described occurred in other civilizational areas, Seffinga's presentation nevertheless, in effect, asserted that Northwest European humanity (and its American extension) most completely articulated this representation of common human life and experience, for, as Seffinga pointed out, the American and French Revolutions (which came at the end of a long cultural, including theological, controversy) were "people's

revolutions" in a way new to history. Accordingly, in the realm of English-language poetry, the clearest formulation of a People's Poetry with its greatest literary effectiveness, Seffinga argued, occurred in the United States after Whitman, whereas in the still partially traditionalsocial situation in Britain, it was not until the late Victorian period that, with Thomas Hardy's poetry, "the beginning of modern People's Poetry" can be seen in "his consistent use of populist language and images". As Seffinga concluded that Canada and Canadian People's Poetry " developed under the influences of these two peoples" (the Americans and the British), it might be thought that he is suggesting that the ethos of our populist poetry is a mixture of Whitman's optimism (or, as Malcolm Cowley calls it, mystical " self-inflation") and Hardy's pessimism (or as R.P. Blackmur more accurately names it, "privation of his humanity", brought about by the influence of the ideas of a wholly secular science), a quite convincing observation if something like this historical account be accepted, one which, however, perhaps not as obviously, describes a basis for further reflection that is compact, circular, and effectively closed against transcendence, and in this sense marmoreal like the sepulchre of the Southey poem.

This closure of the life of the spirit, and its substitution with inner-worldly mysticisms of the self, is, arguably, represented in Southey's myth by the "Judgement- seat" of "righteous Baly" (or Bali. from Sanskrit "power"), which might be identified with the empty "Golden Throne", supported by mankind, Bali being the grandson of the demon Ravana's first incarnation, the virtuous rival of the gods, and usurper of Indra's power, defeated only by Vishnu incarnated partially as Krishna, a notion parallel to the Pauline

description of a spiritual battle against "principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12 KJV). In the more complex (in the sense of complicated) context of the modern world, of course, new expressions of the fundamental perennial struggle between reality and illusion in the life of the spirit, beyond those symbolized in Hindu mythology, Pauline theology, or Romantic "poetic theology", might be expected to be attempted, particularly in the present era of the breakdown of the ideological dream-worlds put in place as "ersatz religions" (as Eric Voegelin calls them) by earnest moralists (and immoralists) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The three presenters of papers at the Marmora Controversy of Poets, who followed Jeff Seffinga's overview of People's Poetry's course to date, were engaged in just such an enterprise, one which holds promise of the possible recovery of the lost marbles of the Canadian mosaic.

The fourth in the series of Controversies of Poets was convened, as was mentioned, to begin to address the finding of the previous three that the ideological resources of the tradition were exhausted, requiring an examination of its deeper "spiritual" (i.e. philosophical or religious) underpinnings in order for People's Poetry to revive and make progress. Although this was not stated, the precedent within the tradition for such a move is historically clear - in the Canadian context, the most obvious prototype being the decades-long great debate between Milton Acorn and Al Purdy concerning (in the first place) Marxism-Leninism versus Liberal Existentialism, and then (implicit in their work) theism versus agnosticism/atheism. As this pattern makes plain, when ideological solutions to the problems of

human existence lose their explanatory power, thinking is forced to the level of theology/philosophy. In thus reconsidering fundamental insights, customary symbols come into question, in the case of People's Poetry, the symbol of "the People" itself.

The first of the controversialists, Brighton, Ontario poet, small press publisher, and President of the Canada-Cuba Literary Alliance, Richard M. (Tai) Grove addressed this basic issue head-on. Noting the terminological (and even orthographic) imprecision of usage of the expression "People's Poetry", and its applicational ambiguity (regular employment to denote both an historical "people" and the toilers, powerless, "ordinary people" of a society) he concluded that People's Poetry can be defined as (following Merriam-Webster's definition of "people") a poetry embodying "the expression and reflection of a common interest, culture or tradition", a "concept", inclusive, perhaps, of the "common plight and solidarity" of ordinary people, suggested by discussant R.D. Roy, a religious tradition (such as the Anglicanism of Milton Acorn and John B. Lee, noted by moderator, James Deahl) or his own former atheism or present Christian belief, both of which express a philosophical or spiritual tradition.

The second controversialist, Marmora poet and co-organizer of the Purdy Country Literary Festival (of which this Controversy was a part), Chris Faiers, took a different tack, strongly acknowledging the current irrelevance, and, indeed, destructiveness of "such dialectical humanist political philosophies as Marxism", with which People's Poetry often was formerly associated, but focussing on the "poetry" aspect of the tradition in question, arguing that its renewal lies not in seeking religious or philosophical bases for it, but in

recognizing that "the act of writing and publishing poetry has served as a spiritual and philosophical function in our [poets'] lives, perhaps the dominant one", so that "the very practice of thinking critically, observing our lives, and attempting to produce art [as well as] some traces of wisdom through reflection, is perhaps our truest and most defining spirituality and philosophy-in fact, our religion." The sources of and standards for such critical thinking, observation, artistic production, and "wisdom through reflection", are, Faiers suggested, "whatever helps a People's Poet challenge the negatives in the status quo: imperialism, class hierarchies and social injustice in general", and recognize that "the need for Canadian independence from the American empire has reached a crucial point." The Anglican background of Milton Acorn, John B. Lee, and other People's Poets in Canada, noted by Moderator Deahl, was understood by Faiers as either (as Richard Grove had suggested) an unimportant sociological accident, or a liability for the poets in question, as "being Anglican entails a tradition of being part of the power structure, whether in a big city or a rural village", so that "those [Anglicans] who choose not to be part of the class elite still inherit a tradition of enablement, a perhaps subconscious sense that they have inherited from their Anglican ancestors access to the keys of power, perhaps even a distant sense of noblesse oblige." In short, Faiers concluded that "it is to the credit of People's Poets that they have chosen Shelley's role of unacknowledged legislators rather than inheritors of power through their church connections", offering as a description of "the spirituality of creating poetry" the following communication from Rockwood, Ontario, People's Poet Katherine Gordon (quoted in part):

". . . poetry in its pure form is like meditation. It connects oneto the source of all the particle waves of manifestation. The poet becomes one for a brief while with creation and clear sightedness, stark truth and dark truth but the light beyond that explains the constructive and destructive forces swirling on this plain [*sic*]. At the present time dark forces appear strong until we learn that together we can change the world to a harmonious balance where greed and materialism are the ugly twins of compassion and sharing ."

The third controversialist, Egbert, Ontario poet Anna Plesums, who confessed that she had not thought about the topic of People's Poetry before being asked to make this presentation, and had not realized that she was herself a People's Poet until now, read four of her poems that she believed addressed the spiritual substance of the tradition. The first, "my reasons for writing", catalogued these reasons as follows:

Reflecting immaterial perceptions
Life and death and Light and darkness
Not measurable by any kind of scale
Wanting to give the inner self
To friends who don't exist

The second, "Am I there?", expressed the self-analytical basis for her ethical critique of contemporary society:

The most contagious diseases
(Silent killers of soul)
Are greed and bureaucracy.

We don't even know that we have them
How to cure it?
Start with yourself
Dusting your soul to find them

. . .

To cure any
You can do only yourself for yourself
It isn't an easy process
Because these pests have food around
To survive and grow
Socially promoted by advertisements.

In a similar aphoristic style, Plesums went on to outline her cosmology and metaphysics (in "Grace"):

Cosmos is regulated
Sun, moon, stars and planets,

. . .

We - but a dust or a drop in it
Don't pay a moments [*sic*] thought
That we too belong in this universal order.
No matter how we search
No matter what we do
No matter what we think or create
Universe is still in its own order and balance
Kept by a Hand we never see.

Stop meddling and stirring up parts
That are not ours to conquer
And never will be!
. . . Grace is not possible to explain
Now or ever . . .

Finally, the poet gave us a sample of her political musings, presumably based on the philosophical anthropology/theology detailed in the first three poems read (as sketched above):

Thought

News on TV– scandals or seed for thinking?
What to do with the garbage?
Wasted time on disputable solution
Instead of how to cure
Why not try to figure out
How to stop the production of it
Well --
That is touching some one's financial growth
Where is the limit for financial growth?
Who are the individuals needing it limitless?
What for?
Politics? Power? Research to have more of what?
We have lost the base.

. . .

The End is Death
What do we leave behind???
Money, drugs, new generation which does not know
That work is the best medicine
To eliminate poverty, depression, loneliness, boredom
And other contemporary diseases...
To begin with give and take the only pill you need
LOVE

At the conclusion of the presentations by the three controversialists, there was general discussion (although not

really a debate) about various points raised. The notion of an atheist (and specifically a Marxist) spirituality was canvassed, Katherine Beeman of Montreal pointing out the great interest of contemporary Marxists in Native American beliefs. R.D. Roy of Belleville took up the matter of the identity of "a people", citing Doris Lessing (in her Massey Lectures) as noting that an articulate people have responsibility. Anna Plesums remarked that in getting to the bottom of this question of "the people", she had "never stopped asking 'Why?'", an attitude developed in discussion with her pastor, whose rejoinder had been "Why not?", an inquiry that had convinced her that "people always want community", a place where they can be "open, honest, andaccepted ." Ms Beeman stated that in her view, the stories of People's Poets needed to be heroic, as in Ms Plesums' poems, showing that what had been achieved had been through will. The spirit of Cuban poet and patriot Jose Marti appeared present at this amiable Controversy, all participants seeming to agree with Marti's sentiment, cited near the outset of the "dispute": "Who's the idiot who thinks the people don't need poetry?"

The variety of spiritualities explicated in this discussion, and by the preceding presenters, might have been taken to be illustrative of the modern "multicultural" nature of Canada, but a better analysis, in my view, would have seen this plurality of philosophies of being as a poetic recovery of the original Canadian"mosaic". For, as many commentators have noted, the contemporary ideological concept of "multi-culturalism"is drawn from U.S .sociology and politics of the 1960s (Nathan Glazer and Daniel P.Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot,* 1963), a period during which the older "mosaic" concept of Canada was disappearing because of (among other factors) the influence of U.S. Positivistic social science in

Canadian universities. The American foundation (as the doyen of U.S. Populist Poetry Carl Sandburg recognized) had been Puritan, while Canada's beginnings had included Native, Roman Catholic, Palatine German Brethren, Quaker, Mennonite, Methodist, Lutheran, and Protestant Reformed (as well as the Puritan version of this) elements, placed in the relatively weak colonial setting of a Romantically-influenced Anglicanism, a branch of Christianity which has claimed to incorporate the essentials of Roman Catholic philosophy and tradition, Protestant theology, and the mystical theology of the Eastern Fathers, while acknowledging modern discoveries in the natural and social sciences, although not uncritically.

Anglicanism was a response to the "Great Confusion" (as Eric Voegelin calls it) of the Reformation period (and the preceding Renaissance) in European history, out of which multiple competing claims to be "The People of God" emerged, the precursors of the modern ideological movements. The "demonism" (as sociologist Max Weber called the closed and destructive nature of ideological thinking) of the movements can be exorcised, and the good that they claim to seek achieved, through the opening of the soul, i.e., through the experience of transcendence, as Voegelin notes.

The catalyst for the Renaissance, and its "mosaic" (from Greek *mousaikos*, "of the Muses") of spiritualities, was the work of Eastern Christian polymaths such as Michael Constantine Psellus (1018-1079 A.D.) and George Gemistus Pletho (1355-1452 A. D.), who came from the vicinity of the original Marmora (Latin: "marbles"), an island in the Sea of Marmora between Europe and Asia that provided much of the marble used in Classical art and architecture. As Byron fought for the restoration to Greece from Britain of the Classical

"Elgin marbles", so it is to be hoped that the Canadian poets gathered at the new Marmora have, through their spiritual deliberations, helped in the struggle to restore the Mosaic's lost marbles.

ChrisFaiers and Chase atWarren Fraser the Shaman Shack, Zen RiverGardens, Malone, Ontario

CHAPTER 4
RECOVERING RENAISSANCE

I

The general cultural consciousness of the advent of a "Post-Modern" era in the wake of the collapse of the ideologies put in place in the nineteenth century has created a sense of freedom and openness to human possibilities, but it has also engendered a widespread sense of disconnectedness from others and from the past that threatens, in many minds, a coming world disorder, or, alternatively,

tyranny.

A parallel psycho-social situation occurred at the beginning of the Modern Era that produced, first in Europe and America, and then in the countries influenced by Western societies, a cultural and political movement that attempted to welcome the new freer human relations, while retaining the communal links and artistic (in the broadest sense) distinctions of the past. Although often derailed and deformed during the Age of Ideology now passing, this cultural tendency (present strongly in the liberal nationalist populism of Italy, France and Ireland, the Narodism of Russia, the Young China movement, the *Ligue nationaliste* of Quebec, American Populism and Progressivism, Canadian "Red Toryism", British Tory socialism etc.), survived, usually most articulately in the realms of literature and visual art, these coming together, often, as poetry. It is thus perhaps not surprising that it is in the tradition of "People's Poetry" that one finds a lasting legacy of the Early Modern consciousness that may have much to say to the contemporary civilizational crisis.

In the Canadian context, which, like all national circumstances, has its own historical and political specificities, People's Poetry is in danger of "dropping off the radar screen" entirely, a fate similar to more of the Canadian experience than is common in the case of other societies, for reasons explained by Canadian philosopher, George Grant.

This situation, which, by its very nature suggests that intervention is necessary in order to preserve cultural content of possibly important practical relevance, also indicates the perhaps unique value of this Canadian species of poetic populism, in that it has arisen on the border of the one remaining, and most influential, of the ideologies of

modernity, American-based liberal corporation capitalism, now overspreading the earth.

As Eric Voegelin, the German- American political philosopher, pointed out, modernity has been a growth within Western civilization that has affected the world, but the ideologies of modernity are now "running to their end." People's Poetry, which has acted as a bridge (among others) through modernity to the present from the Western cultural past can help to stimulate the spiritual and philosophical discussions that are now so urgently necessary within all the cultural communities of Canada and the planet.

However, this will not occur if the spiritual and social experiences expressed through People's Poetry are allowed to drop below the public horizon of awareness. As corporations and governments, and the mass media they control, cannot be expected to rectify this situation, it is clearly up to concerned individuals to come together to organize support for the retrieval and promotion of this important cultural tradition. It is therefore proposed that a Foundation for People's Poetry be established.

June 19, 2007

II

...

They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords,

Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.

They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;

They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.

And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs,

Their doors are shut in the evening; and they know no songs.

We hear men speaking for us of new laws strong and sweet,

Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in the street.

It may be we shall rise the last as Frenchmen rose the first,

Our wrath come after Russia's wrath and our wrath be the worst.

It may be we are meant to mark with our riot and our rest

God's scorn for all men governing. It may be beer is best.

But we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet.

Smile at us, pay us, pass us. But do not quite forget.

.K. Chesterton, "The Secret People" (1915)

These concluding stanzas of G.K. Chesterton's great poetic

"people's history of England" (as "The Secret People" might be called), which appeared in his *Collected Poems* during 1915 as his countrymen were wondering how they had become mired in the morass and bloody butchery of modern trench warfare offers, as it did for many Canadians at the time, food for contemporary reflection on the part of the Canadian people. However, while the parallels here and now in the realms of imperialism, bureaucratic and technocratic decision-making, ideological obfuscation, and media manipulation are perhaps too obvious to rehearse, one aspect of Chesterton's prophetic utterance is more appropriate to Canadians today than to the English (or even the Canadians who were shortly to take Vimy) of his own, or any, era. This is the point embodied in the title of the poem; i.e. that the English people are a "secret people", for in the latter part of the twentieth century, Canadians became a "secret people" even to themselves, as the social forces unleashed by continentalization, technologization and globalization created a "national amnesia" in Canada probably unparalleled in the world. This has left Canada's culture, which actually has a longer continuous history of development than that of the United States, and its highly-developed tradition of People's Poetry, fossils in their own land, a circumstance that demands rectification.

As a first step, the large number of practising poets who consider themselves to be heirs of the "greats" of the People's Poetry tradition in Canada might recognize that a great deal of work remains to be done to develop and articulate a proper scholarly understanding of People's Poetry in this country, and that much unaccessed material is available in private collections, archives etc. to help in achieving this end. Accordingly, a steering committee might be set up to search

for a Board of Directors for a Foundation for People's Poetry, a body that could attract philanthropical support for the on-going endeavour. Such deliberate organization is necessary, it would seem, as in the climate of "Post-Modern" individualism that now obtains, the natural anarchism of populist poets is intensified, encouraging an atmosphere of eccentricity and parochialism, and making collective efforts, and attempts to relate Canadian cultural movements to broader historical trends, difficult, thus obscuring the very real Canadian contributions to world civilization. With the spark returned to them in this way, the Canadian people may again remember who they are, and finally fully and transformatively speak.

(The foregoing is the substance of a short talk given at the Fourth Controversy of Poets held as part of the Purdy Country Literary Festival, Marmora, Ontario, August 4, 2007)

III

Regaining Memory: A Review of Anna Yin, *Farewell to Sunflowers*: *Poems*, (English/Chinese), (second edition),(self-published), 2007 52 pp.

Writing in the late 1950s, the Harvard University scholar of Chinese literature Glen W. Baxter noted that, while sometimes using traditional Chinese forms, "modern Chinese poetry" had in general "merely exchanged Chinese models for foreign ones, principally the imagists and Whitman in reverse chronological order." Baxter went on to point out that in the fluid social and political situation of the country, "no general revitalization of……traditional (Chinese poetic) forms……appeared imminent."

Farewell to Sunflowers, Anna Yin's third chapbook of spiritually-sensitive verse represents, I believe, both the recovery of the "vast ocean" of Chinese poetry (as the editor of *Poetry of the South* calls the legacy) that has started to occur in China in the last twenty-five years, and the turn to healthier and more psychically-balanced Western parallels than the ultimately self-referential and flat Imagists, or the overtly self-inflated Whitman. For Ms Yin, an immigrant to Canada from Mainland China in 1999, clearly finds inspiration in the poetic tropes of her native tradition, with its combination of Taoistic mysticism and Confucian realism, and (on her own account) in the poetry of the "protesting Puritan" (as Louis Untermeyer calls her) of nineteenth century New England, Emily Dickinson. This provides the reader with satisfying verse that is (in its English version, at least; I am not literate in Chinese) both deeply Chinese in cultural character, and modern Western in individual perspective, without being narrowly parochial in either respect.

Many examples of this happy conjunction in *Farewell to Sunflowers* might be cited, beginning with the first (and title) poem in the book, which opens with an expansion of the trope of the Excellent Archer of the Moon Festival who brought down nine suns that were threatening to shrivel up the world:

> A million arrows are aimed at the sky
> yet the sun hasn't been shot down.

The poet, then, "glancing back" sees that the "golden faces (of the sunflowers) are full of tears", an observation that reveals "mourning grasses (that) burn flames in the wind", and "duckweeds and swimming fish, those floating clouds and breezes" that "are all behind me in warm waves and

lonely songs." This meditation in turn leads the poet to the contemplative stage of the final stanza which concludes that

> In turning, I lose my way
> And feel the lotus core in pieces.
> With arrows sifting through my hand,
> I see sunset in crimson.

The poet has here, apparently, reached the psychic position of a doubting "demythologized" Excellent Archer, a type of modern mysticism holding both belief and scepticism concerning the order of being together within a trust in the "openness" of the self, a structure of consciousness most developed in New England Puritan mysticism, as Eric Voegelin has shown (in his *On the Form of the American Mind*). Marshall Schacht, in his poem "Not to Forget Miss Dickinson", has (perhaps a bit unkindly) formulated this cast of mind as it was crystallized in the work of the Amherst, Massachusetts, poet, in the nineteenth century:

> See how the sprightly squirrel mind
> Resolves to the kernel love so great
> The looking on it sets you blind
> An instant, as if in sun or hate.
>
> Observe the "gipsy face transfigured"
> Go through the magic burning act
> Of singing in a room beleaguered
> Up to its sills by the gnawing fact.

New England Puritan mysticism developed as a distinct intellectual tradition, severed from its European roots, so that

when its decline into a shallow pragmatism or eccentric esotericism set in during the latter part of the nineteenth century, it had no depth of experience from which to renew itself. This is, one hopes, not an inevitable outcome in the case of China, as it should not be for Canadians, whose traditions extend back to the general history of the West, before the Age of Ideology (although Canadians, because of their colonial status vis-a-vis the United States, often suffer from a very severe case of cultural amnesia in this regard). The centrality of anamnesis (recollection) in the main (mystic) stream of Western philosophy is expressed in an equivalent way for Chinese thought by Ms Yin in the concluding stanza of her poem "The Trip to Lan Hill":

> Night is dark
> I hear your words,
> memory is
> the first sunray of dawn.

IV
Introduction to Anna Yin, *Wings Toward Sunlight*, Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2011.

In writing of the evolution of language in his classic *Poetic Diction* (1928), Owen Barfield noted that "to the poet or critic, a language which has reached the stage of development" in which word order is fixed and so essential to the expression of meaning that a slight change may actually reverse the sense "will present the appearance of crystallization." Barfield further remarked that "of known languages, Chinese is the farthest developed in this direction." James J. Y. Liu, in his *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (1962),

suggests that "the Chinese mentality" itself"is inclined to concentrate on the essence rather than the appearance, and is therefore 'essentialist' " with regard to immediate experience, but, paradoxically, "in its attitude towards life as a whole, it is more 'existentialist'", a structure of consciousness productive of short, concrete, and rather eclectic poems in which implications of grand epic, tragic or "metaphysical" themes are absent, or only hinted at. In these respects, this first full collection of poems by the gifted emerging Chinese-Canadian poet, Anna Yin, is (although written in English), fundamentally in the Chinese style.

However, as a careful reading of this poetry will reveal, Ms Yin, who has lived in Canada for over a decade, has developed the ability in her writing to bridge the Chinese and Western sensibilities, an achievement which has not often occurred either in China, where traditional and Western- style poetic "schools" have been in competition since late Manchu times, or Europe and North America, where "oriental" themes and prosody have been copied (and often parodied) since the Romantics.

Wings Toward Sunlight is a sequence of two movements of the consciousness named by the author as "There Must Be Something" and "We Grow Faces" (the two sections of the book), which describe the poet's discovery of meaning and joy in her poetic dialogue with Western poetry, and two rather different American women poets in particular, Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath. Indeed, the epigraph for Ms Yin's collection is a line from Dickinson, "The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience." This, of course, describes the openness to the transcendent in the ordinary affairs of life, a quality that the philosopher Eric Voegelin (in his *The Form of the American Mind*) finds in

American Puritan mysticism and Common Sense philosophy at their best.

Ms Yin's focus in this book is personal relationships and feelings, but, although her writing sometimes approaches the self-absorption and Surrealism of much contemporary Western poetry, it never falls fully into these modes of expression, the poet clearly rejecting Plath's self-destructive solipsism. While the erotic life is often the subject of these poems, they never fall into eroticism or fixation with sexual eccentricity, themes which are now so often prominent in Western cultural circles. This balance of consciousness is achieved, I believe, because of Ms Yin's genuine blend of Chinese "mystical naturalism" and the rather stark cultural realities she has experienced as an immigrant to Canada, (she is a working high-tech professional, rather than a literary academic, or member of the "opinion-forming classes"), where she has found a spiritual home among the followers of the "People's Poetry" tradition (in 2005, she received the Ted Plantos Memorial Award for People'sPoetry).

*Wings Toward Sunlight*leads the reader from the realm of mundane confusion to a place with a promise of clarity without abandoning ordinary experience for a "Second Reality", as Eric Voegelin calls the ideological dream-world. Ms Yin describes this experience of the *psyche* at the conclusion of the first half of the book:

> It is the sowing season,
> Your finger points to the distant mountains-
> Terrace farms spiral
> Like ladders to heaven.
> -"Beyond Our Knowing"

Wings Toward Sunlightdemonstrates that, despite the dehumanizing

technocracy in which the whole world now lives, the Romantic imagination is still "alive and well." -Humber College, Toronto, July 27, 2010.

V

Foreword to Anna Yin, *Inhaling the Silence: poems,* Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2013

This second collection by talented Chinese-Canadian poet, Anna Yin, extends both the this-worldly and transcendent dimensions of her quite individual perspective. Reminiscent both in sensibility and theme of the work of the great German Romantic poet Novalis, who, in his own words, sought to articulate a perspective "which is mundane and transmundane at the same time", Ms Yin's new poems open the Romantic door again, this time upon the broader field of human social problems, without, however, the self-referential attitude often associated with the Western Romantic tradition, epitomized by another remark of Novalis: "The world shall be as I wish it!"

Inhaling the Silenceis composed of two poetic cycles; the first, "Night Songs", comprises personal spiritual meditations, reminiscent in both title and mood of Novalis' "Hymns to the Night". The second, a series of poems entitled "This Blue Planet", reflects, with a mixture of spiritually realistic sadness and joy, upon the broken efforts of both Nature and humans to find happiness and fulfillment through schemes, plans, doctrines and techniques, which have to rest "when night falls" at which point

we all sway like seaweeds
longing to fly-

beyong this blue planet.

–"Grandma's Warning"
Humber College, Toronto
February 1, 2013

VI
Introduction to I.B. Iskov, *Sapphire Seasons, poems*, Thornhill, Ontario: Aeolus House, 2009

At the conclusion of the section entitled "Poetry of the People" in my Grade 9 (or "first form high school", as it was called then) English Literature reader, the editors placed founding Group of Seven painter and poet J.E.H. MacDonald's "Kitchen Window", presumably as a contemporary example of the genre that the anthology had outlined with preceding selected Scottish ballads, Nova Scotian sea chanties, Canadian folk songs, and items by Burns, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and a couple of lesser-known poets. The book, the 1956 printing of the 1948 edition of *Our Heritage*, a standard text in Ontario schools for many years, thus, in effect, defined what the Canadian "People's Poetry" tradition was understood, (at least by the editors of the book), to be at the time, or, perhaps, indicated where the "opinion-forming classes" of Canada of the period thought that it had arrived. For the editors, this seems to be at a place recognizing "the greatness of the common people", as exemplified by MacDonald's lines in "Kitchen Window":

I glance from humble toil and see
The star-gods go in heavenly pride;
Bright Sirius glittering through a tree,
Orion with eternal stride.

And as I watch them in the blue
With shading hand against the glass,
I know not if their work I do,
Or if for me they rise and pass.

From the point of view of the early twenty-first century, which has just witnessed a history of oppressions and destructions unleashed by believers in "the greatness of the common people", the expression may have a somewhat hollow ring, and MacDonald's speculations about his activity's "star-god" status may conjure up an additional spectral shudder or two from the 1930's (when the poem was originally published).

In short, populism, and populist poetry, were part of the civilizational crisis of the mid-twentieth century, as I think that any impartial intellectual historian would acknowledge.

Less recognized, I believe, has been the conviction of some cultural commentators that certain aspects of the culture of common people, and particularly "People's Poetry", may be a medium for the recovery of social sanity in our age of (as I take it) extreme intellectual confusion. At the conclusion of his definitive 1956 *History of Western Literature*, J.M. Cohen, who had earlier argued that the fashionable existentialism of his time had "presented no writer with any valid criterion by which to measure the disorder of his age", so that "to write as an existentialist is to describe chaos in

terms of chaos", expressed his belief that a literary and general civilizational renaissance would be possible through the revival of popular poetry and drama, in the following terms:

?For poetry in the service only of a tiny cultured minority will be as incapable of real achievement as poetry hamstrung by its subservience to a political creed or to the compulsive advocacy of a *way of life* [italics in original]. Poetry and the drama if they are to be reborn, must express a belief which is shared by the community, as they did for the Greeks, for the Christians of the Middle Ages and even of the Counter-Reformation, and as since the Romantic era they have progressively ceased to do. Imaginative literature in the service of rebellion, or satanism, quickly sinks into exhibitionism or obscurity. Imaginative literature as the expression of a deeply apprehended truth, poetry which interprets to a man the myth of his own age, can in the hands of Dante, of Shakespeare, of Cervantes, of Camoes and of Goethe, help to raise the level of a whole civilization." (p. 354)

This new collection, *Sapphire Seasons: Poetry by I.B. Iskov*, illustrates the potentialities for populist poetry detected by Cohen half a century ago in that Ms Iskov's work here is existential, in the sense of being inspired by the events of her personal existence, without being philosophically existentialist, in the sense of defining truth in terms of the contents of her own mind and will, and political, in the sense of addressing matters of public life, without being political in the sense of programmatic or ideological.

Arranged conventionally in four seasonal poetic cycles, the eighty items in this book cover a wide variety of themes expressed in a consistent straightforward style that never-

theless often articulates considerable complexity of thought and sometimes suggests an attraction to the surreal and the romantic (although these more esoteric elements never overpower the dominant down-to-earth common sense of the whole).

In the first section of the book, "Spring Poems", Ms Iskov has gathered work which introduces the reader to her perspective and her understanding of its origins in her background and experiences, giving us a basis for her poetry in existential reflection, a common starting point for contemporary verse. However, in the following sequence of "Summer Poems", the author describes her exploration of psychological or spiritual states beyond this foundation in terms reminiscent (for me, at least) of the writing of Arthur Rimbaud, (for example in "Between the Lines" and "Imagine the Hunger"), with its tortured intensity. This mode of emotionally-dominant musing is transcended in the next group of "Autumn Poems", which open out into full philosophical meditation, at the centre of which is the life and work of her self-identified mentor, the late Toronto People's Poet, Ted Plantos, who "in darkness and the coming dawn...breathed stars in timeless orbits..." ("Ted's Long Waking [in memory of Ted Plantos]"). Finally, in the last series of poems in the book, associated, of course, with winter, Ms Iskov presents us with a set of philosophical speculations dealing with the "big questions" (as we might put it), the apparently disparate nature of which is modified by the general cultural context of the whole collection, referred to throughout the book, which in this concluding section is alluded to as "The Jewish Side of the Poem."

For Ms Iskov, a practitioner of Conservative Judaism, is evidently writing in the tradition of Jewish Humanism

(described by Leon Roth in *Jewish Thought as a Factor in Civilization,* for example), which has historically interactedculturally with its civilizational surroundings (from the Classical world through the Middle Ages to modern times) to the mutual benefit of the participants. An obvious example of this cultural cross-fertilization over centuries involved Greek, Jewish, Christian and Islamic philosophy and mysticism, and in the realm of poetics one might cite the thousand-year history of the type of synagogue poetry known as the piyyut (from the Greek word for "poet") as an instance of fruitful inter-cultural influence, both of which points are made by the historian of Judaism, Isidore Epstein, in his *Judaism: A Historical Presentation. Sapphire Seasons* is an interesting and clearly-expressed collection of verse by a thoughtful contemporary ordinary Canadian Jewish woman of broad humane sympathies. It is to be hoped that its appearance signals the beginnings in Canada of the sort of renaissance in popular poetry, and through it of popular philosophy and culture, that J.M.Cohen wished for at a time when the civilizational crisis of the West was more clearly apprehended than is the case at present. Humber College, Toronto, September, 2008

VII

According to a scholarly Latin teacher of mine in high school, Gilbert Highet's *Poets in a Landscape,* which recreates the spiritual life of Classical Rome through the writings of its poets, is so successful in its objective that it kept him awake for a whole night (for the first time in his life) to complete reading it. While I know of no such single text that accomplishes a similar feat for the field of People's Poetry, a consideration of the life and work of two Populist poets with an interest in the spirit of the modern Cuban experience, the Canadian Al Purdy, and the "saint with a sword" (as Waldo Frank calls the great Cuban patriotic poet, Jose Marti), will provide a sketch of the world, and its psycho-social history, for which People's Poets speak.

As the account of this "cosmion" or little world of order (to use the term of Austrian philosopher Adolf Stohr) is, as yet, fragmentary, it is difficult to find a point of entry, but one is suggested by Gerry Goldberg's anthology of imaginative short prose and poetry, *A Strange Glory*, published by McClelland and Stewart in Toronto in 1975. Goldberg, a high school teacher, assembled passages from Hesiod, the High Romantic poets, classical Gothic and horror fiction, philosophical fantasy fiction, (e.g. David Lindsay), contemporary "human potential movement" psychology, and an assortment of other international writing, juxtaposing these items with selections from a wide range of contributors to the canon of Canadian poetry. Included in the latter category were well-known poems by Archibald Lampman, James Reaney, A.M.Klein, Margaret Atwood, Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, Jay Macpherson, George Frederick Scott, Wilfred Watson, and Purdy's early poetic

mentor, Bliss Carman. Al Purdy, and his colleagues and collaborators in the forging of the new Canadian People's Poetry of the 1960s, Milton Acorn and Raymond Souster, are notable by their absence, however, from this map of the undiscovered country of the spirit of populist culture outlined by Goldberg.

Interestingly, American People's Poets Walt Whitman and Edgar Lee Masters are represented, as is Jose Marti (by his poem exploring the notion of the transmigration of souls, "Yoke and Star" (or "Yugo y Estrella"), an item which has attracted the attention of Cuban and American scholars, (such as Miguel Jorrin, Felix Lizaso, José A. Beguez Cesar and Richard Butler Gray), engaged in the debate about Marti's religious philosophy, and its relationship to the "panentheism" (a variation of pantheism) of German Idealism, and the neo-Gnosticism of Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, and the connection of all of this with the matter of the affinity of the spirit of modernity for the religious field of heretical Hinduism.

Canadian critic, Frank Davey, in his *Guide to English-Canadian Literature Since 1960* (1974), perhaps suggests why Purdy, at least, fails to find a place in Goldberg's gallery of poetic "godded men": "...in Purdy's poems (there is) certainly no retreat into gnosticism..." This is arguably true if one only considers the "cataphatic" (positive or "affirmation of images") aspect of the Gnostic consciousness, but certainly not so if one includes its "apophatic" (negative or "denial of images") side. Indeed, as an apparently conscious admirer and practitioner of Existentialism, the philosophical roots of which are to be found in the "apophatic" modern Gnostic thinkers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, Purdy (in his poems "In the Desert" and "On Realizing He Has Written

Some Bad Poems" , for example), concludes on a negative Gnostic note the positive Gnostic story of the life of the spirit imagined by the bards of the founding generations of liberal populist nationalism , such as Marti, arguably the chief philosophical inspiration for the distinctive Marxism-Leninism of Latin America (which could be called "Marti-Leninism", perhaps).

VIII

In speaking Ojibway you've got to watch the clouds
Milton Acorn,"On Speaking Ojibway"

Political philosopher Eric Voegelin, in his encyclopedic *History of Political Ideas*, accumulated the evidence that modern political problems originate, most nearly, with the unresolved philosophical issues of the period in Western history conventionally called "the Middle Ages", coming to a focus in the rather loosely-defined era known as "the Renaissance". On this account, therefore, contemporary political thought is most articulate when it restates the Renaissance problematic, and unhelpful when it obscures it.

An opening in this regard occurred in Canada in the 1920s in the field of poetry in the "metaphysical tradition" with the work of the McGill Group/Montreal Poets such as A.J.M.Smith, F.R.Scott, A.M.Klein and L. Kennedy. One branch of this group, built around "Irving Layton, a minor figure in the Montreal Group in the forties", as Desmond Pacey put it, muted the mythopoeic element in the Movement in order to absorb the proletarian practicalities, problems and possibilities of the emerging new urban life of Canada of the 1950s, in closer relationship with that of the United States than ever previously, as expressed most notably in the writing

of Louis Dudek, Dorothy Livesay and Raymond Souster, the poet of the new centre of Canadian business, Toronto. Marxian, quasi-Marxian or, at least, "Leftist" of some sort, this "School of Layton" (in Pacey's phrase), while eschewing conventional metaphysics, nevertheless embraced a Humanistic spirituality (often not obvious) that was related to the Renaissance roots of modernity in a way explained theoretically by the British Marxist literary critic of the 1930s, Christopher Caudwell, in his *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* as follows:

"'Matter, surrounded by a sensuous poetic glamour, seems to attract man's whole entity by winning smiles.' So said Marx and Engels of materialism before it became one-sided mechanical materialism, when it was still bathed in the artistic splendour of the Renaissance." (p. 218)

While the first generation of the "School of Layton" (Dudek, Livesay, Souster and Layton himself, for example) did not resort to elements drawn from "the artistic splendour of the Renaissance" to enliven their essentially materialist prosody, by the second generation, "idealist" (to use Marxian language) formulations were beginning to appear. In the work of the students of the "School of Layton", Al Purdy and Milton Acorn, particularly, I believe, one detects a movement of thought anticipating the later recovery of the full amplitude of the "New Left" and "New Age Politics."

Purdy left the crucible of Modernist Canadian verse, Montreal, after 1957 to build a home near the village of Ameliasburgh in Prince Edward County, Ontario, in the Bay of Quinte region of the eighteenth-century Loyalist settlements of his ancestors, and this became his "Walden". Joined there by his Montreal friend and interlocutor, Acorn, in 1960 (prior to the latter's move to Toronto)*, the simple

Ameliasburgh"A-frame" house became the site of discussions that launched what might be called the "Quinte Renaissance" in Canadian poetry and poetics. Philosophically, this entailed the development of an intense form of Existentialism on Purdy's part, and the elaboration of a simultaneously Marxist, Esotericist and Christian consciousness by Acorn, although these tendencies were not as clearly defined at this early stage of the poets' careers as they were later, of course.

The intellectual link between the two men was Existentialism, which took the culturally-older form in Acorn of Esotericism or Gnosticism, (an identification established by philosophers Voegelin and Hans Jonas). This was the "new" or positive Existentialism (as defined by David Holbrook in his *Lost Bearings in English Poetry*) that became popular in the early 1960s in "counter-cultural"circles, first as a "new humanism", and later as various forms of neo-paganism.

The Quinte region is an auspicious locale for Existentialist speculation. Picton, Ontario, poet George Allen Kingston, wrote in the accompanying note to his "The Bay of Quinte" in *Legendary Lyrics* (1938) that this region has Romantic associations, especially keen for him because of the events of his childhood and young manhood there, but, surprisingly, in view of the detailed descriptions of the historical and mythological material he gives associated with many of the other places about which he composes his *Lyrics,* Quinte's "legend" remains unexplained, save only to be originally that of the "Lac de Kente" of the voyageurs. Pronounced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by Loyalist and later settlers "Kantee" or "Kentee", the name reverts to the Mohawk *kenta* or *Kenhenta,* "meadow", "prairie" or "stopping place", or, more likely (according to Alan

Rayburn), *Yo-ya-da-do-konthe*, "sanctuary home of the thunder bird." The suggested derivation of "Quinte" from the Latin *quintus* ("fifth" of, or from, something), is believed to be unlikely.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, Mohawk militancy, and the project of formulating a new "people's history" of Canada for the television age by the opinion-forming classes of the country brought renewed interest in the Quinte region, for it was from Quinte country that Deganawidah (Dekanahwidah), the Peacemaker and founder of the Iroquois Confederacy had emerged before 1570 A.D. Understood to be a "Heavenly Messenger", this prophet, born to a virgin mother in a Huron village at the time on the site of the present-day Mohawk community of Tyendinaga, west of Deseronto, and who lived at the Lake on the Mountain, near Picton, crossed Lake Ontario in his canoe made of white rock taking tidings of a "Great Law" which would establish "Peace and Power " among the Iroquois nations, making them (in Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera's phrase) "the Romans of the New World" in terms of the methods and scope of their warfare, and social organization. From Benjamin Franklin and other founders of the United States through Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to later Feminist and other modern ideological entrepreneurs (such as advocates of the "Holy Blood and Holy Grail" Masonic notion of the origins of liberal democracy), the polity of a "united nations" extending from the Mohawks by Deganawidah and his chief disciple Hiawatha, has been of intense interest, for the ideologists have sought a "stop history" (as Voegelin calls it) approach to the problems of human existence, which requires a location where the Beyond can be read into the Beginning (an "America" as new Utopia). However, the rise of the Iroquois

Confederacy from the sixteenth century (with its roots in interaction with the Hurons and other Iroquoian peoples pushed west historically from the St. Lawrence Valley), as told by the complex of Deganawidah tales, seems, in terms of philosophical anthropology, much more likely an example of the "metis" culture, noted by John Ralston Saul in his new book, *A Fair Country*, that developed in what is now Eastern Canada during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of European contact (p.145). Indeed, as all Canadian schoolchildren know (or are supposed to know), the Norse had reached (and briefly settled near) the mouth of the St. Lawrence River by 1004 A.D., Basque, Norman and Breton fishers frequented the lower parts of the river in the fifteenth century, and a representative of a great European Renaissance power (Jacques Cartier) had reached the present site of Montreal in 1534, encountering Iroquoian people. A fact even more suggestive of the "metis" nature of the Deganawidah stories, and the origin of the Confederacy that they describe in a response to European incursions, is the discovery, by Concordia University scientists in the late 1980s, of a layer of phosphates in the sediment on the bottom of Adolphus Reach, indicating the use of European lye soap by a large population living around this entrance to the Bay of Quinte, near the Lake on the Mountain, between 1480 A.D. and 1520 A.D., just prior to the era of Deganawidah there.

As archaeology indicates, after the destruction of Huronia (Wendake) and its trading links in what is now Eastern and Central Ontario by the Iroquois after 1650, the land was traversed by *coureurs de bois* and bands from the hunting and gathering Native People of the North, particularly the Fur Trade-formed Ojibway (Anishnaabe), with settlements being small and often temporary. This "vacuum" started to be filled

by Loyalist Americans (of various ethnic origins, including a large contingent of Native American Iroquois) in the late 1770s, a circumstance that (particularly after the War of 1812 with the United States) generated an "Anglo-Canadian" consciousness parallel to the French-Canadian identity that had existed, centred in the Lower Saint Lawrence River Valley, for a hundred years. Thus Canada, Upper and Lower, emerged onto the stage of history as (in Donald Creighton's memorable phrase) " the empire of the Saint Lawrence", a Mercantilist, commodity-based People with two identities, both rooted in the ideas of imperium of the North-West European Renaissance, and by both of which certain aspects of Aboriginal culture (in a transmogrified form) were absorbed. This created a problem of what might be called "existential vacuity" for the founders of the liberal-democratic Canada of 1867, as no "myth" of the nation from before the Age of Progress could be reformulated (as in Britain and France), and the Fathers of Confederation had largely come together to protect their colonies against the expansionism of a country which had no "myth"from before the sources of the Enlightenment in the Puritan version of Christianity, or a very faded version of one (the "Classic and Christian" elements claimed for the U.S. foundation by American "Paleo-Conservatives" are not negligible, particularly in the case of the pre-Civil War Southern States' traditions of Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism, for example).

The pre-Confederation Canada of the 1840s of Robert Baldwin and Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine that has been of scholarly interest to John Ralston Saul, and specifically the Quinte region of that time, was the source of "Modern Spiritualism", as one of the early patrons of the League of Canadian Poets, John Robert Colombo, has documented.

Carried by its "prophets", the Fox Sisters, across Lake Ontario to Hydesville, New York, it burst upon the American public in1848, among whom it found mass support to a degree unequalled in Britain and the British Empire. As Michael Gomes notes,"Like the counterculture of the 1960s, spiritualism shared a fascination with American Indian lore, communal living, and free love", and, indeed, many of the "controls" (or guides in the spirit realm) directing the spirit communications manifested themselves as "American Indians" (as *The Popular Dictionary of Spiritualism* remarks, with some perplexity: "Among controls, all nationalities are met, though for no clear reason North American Indians seem to preponderate."). The Fox Sisters came from a farm near Consecon, not far from Carrying Place at the western end of the Bay of Quinte, and an older sibling had remained in nearby Belleville, and married. Visiting this sister in 1855, Kate Fox, one of the famous mediums, met Susanna Moodie, whose husband and sister, Catharine Parr Traill, were Spiritualist believers, and Fox and Moodie continued their discussions by correspondence, indicating the degree to which Spiritualist concerns animated the early days of English-Canadian Literature, and polite Anglo-Canadian society in general.

As historians of the nineteenth-century Occult Revival have noted, modern spiritualism provided the cultural soil in which modern theosophy grew, the latter taking organizational shape in New York in the mid-1870s. By the 1920s and 1930s, Theosophy (in its various forms) was an important cultural factor in Western societies, including Canada. At the time of Al Purdy's settling in Ameliasburgh, not far from Consecon, the California-based Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC), a quasi-Christian

theosophical group, had established its "Quinte Pronaos (from the ancient Greek term for the space in front of a temple)" in Belleville (1956)*, and the area was later to become of interest to Theosophically-inspired UFO activists and speculators, such as Ottawa-based "metaphysician" Winifred G. Barton*, perhaps because of its designation as the "sanctuary home of the thunderbird (konthe)" in Mohawk, the thunderbird being the main manifestation in Native mythology of the "aeroforms", "flying saucers" or "chariots of the gods" for generations of esotericist mythographers.

Writing of Mt.Shasta in California, which from 1883 has been a centre of Occult activity, Italian author Peter Kolosimo asked (in 1969) "Have the 'sons of the thundering-bird' established one of their secret bases here?" In the same context, he cites an (apparently Eastern) "Canadian Indian tradition" recorded by "the ethnographer Baker" which, while admitting that the account seems to refer to Native and European contact, he applies to a prehistoric period prior to "the disappearance of Atlantis". Excerpts from this legend, which he thinks describes "something apocalyptic (which) must have convulsed the territory now occupied by the U.S.A." are quoted:

"In the times of great forests and flourishing meadows there were demons who kept our people in slavery and sent the young to die amongst the rocks and below the ground. But then came the thunder-bird and our people were liberated and learned about the marvellous cities of the thunder-bird which rose beyond the lakes and rivers.

Many of us went down there and saw the shining cities and their marvels such as the grand homes and the men who flew into the skies to meet the thunder-bird. Then the demons returned, and there was terrible havoc everywhere. The few of

us who had gone down there and managed to get back declared that the cities and the life there had all gone. There, where once such cities stood there is nothing but ruins now." (pp. 95-96)

This material (if genuinely Native in origin) seems syncretistic, composed of Old and New World elements, but this does not necessarily mark it as suspicious, as the centuries-long contact of Europeans with Natives known to have occurred in the St. Lawrence River Basin, for example, may be expected to have produced such "métis" mythopoeia, as J.R. Saul's work suggests. Kolosimo, indeed, notes that in the "Canadian tradition", as well as "nearly all American myth", the thunderbird or "fire-bird" is "linked … with the 'white men'". So, it is perhaps not too imaginative to see some of the latter-day " sons of the thundering-bird" as establishing "one of their secret bases" in Quinte.

ENDNOTES

1. See Richard Lemm, *Milton Acorn: In Love and Anger*, Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1999 pp. 113-117 (Acorn was at AmeliasburghJanuary-October, 1960)

2. Conversation with Faith Brown of the AMORC Toronto Lodge (after 1954 with the Peterborough AMORC) at AMORC Cultural Centre, 835 Broadview Avenue, Toronto, May 12, 2009; telephone conversation with Audrey Hart, Secretary, Quinte Pronaos 1956-1971, May 23, 2009.

3. Telephone conversation with Winifred G.Barton, Frankford, Ontario, July 28, 2006; letter from Winifred G. Barton, Planetary Peace Commission, Frankford, Ontario, August 8, 2006. A talk given at a celebration for Al Purdy Day at "This Ain't the Rosedale Library", 86 Nassau Street, Toronto , Wednesday, April 21, 2010

IX

The clearest and most articulated response to modernity to have developed from the mid-twentieth century recovery of political philosophy in the wake of the catastrophes of National Socialism/Fascism, Marxism-Leninism, and Corporation Capitalism, was the "Classic and Christian" critique of modern "Gnosticism" worked out by German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin. As is clear from his programmatic series of lectures published as *The New Science of Politics* (1952) , Voegelin's analysis (on the analogy of that of Marx vis-à-vis Hegel) grew out of an immanent examination of the thought of certain prominent modern "mystics manquées", notably Max Weber, F.W.J. von Schelling and Thomas Hobbes, measured against the analyses of consciousness and society of the Classic (Platonic and Aristotelian) and Mediaeval Christian thinkers, represented at the beginning of the conventional "Early Modern" period by the "intellectual founder" of Anglicanism, Richard Hooker, in his defence of the Elizabethan Settlement against the "Puritan" movement.

The Hookerian legacy (as Voegelin was aware) had not disappeared in the English-speaking democracies that had evolved out of the compromises of the seventeenth century, producing even popular social critics in the twentieth century (such as G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis), and those influenced by them (such as Aurel Kolnai and George Parkin Grant). However, the general movement of thought even in these democracies after the late 1950s was toward European thinkers who were wrestling with the results of the catastrophe noted above in quasi-Gnostic or Neo-Gnostic terms themselves, so that the "Classic and Christian" versus

"Gnostic" paradigm became problematic (e.g., in the work of George Parkin Grant, who was deeply influenced by the perhaps incomplete philosophical meditations of Simone Weil, and-to some extent at least-the al Farabic reading of Aristotle of Leo Strauss, as well as by the thought of Lewis and Voegelin).

With the military defeat of National Socialism/ Fascism in the 1940s, and the partial demise of Marxism-Leninism in the late twentieth century, the liberal and social democracies that mediate Corporation Capitalism in effect declared victory, but this triumph was short-lived, as the disintegration of their rivals released components of the latter (nationalist socialisms, pragmatic materialisms, mystical atheisms etc.), or competitors (Islamism etc.), that exhibited even more obvious characteristics of political gnosticism. The gradual disintegration of liberal and social democracy themselves during the corresponding period has produced a differentiation of the "Classic and Christian" and Gnostic elements in those ideologies in the Western democracies, necessitating a retheoretization of the basis for contemporary democratic society. Writers influenced by Gnosticism have sensed this, popular versions of the Neo-Gnostic formulations having appeared for several decades (Jacob Needleman's *Lost Christianity* and Tom Harpur's *The Pagan Christ* being recent contributions from the Theosophical field).

Voegelin's own response to this civilizational crisis was to develop a theory of consciousness underpinning a theory of history to support a theory of politics that was "Classic and Christian" in origin in that it was rooted in the Middle Platonism of Plotinus (205 A.D. – 270 A.D.), the mystical theology of Dionysius the Areopagite (late fifth century A.D.), and the Christian mysticism of the author of *The Cloud of*

Unknowing (published between 1349 and 1395), an amplitude of "mystic philosophy" encompassing pre-Nicene up to pre-Reformation articulations of catholic Christian Mystical Theology. As in the case of the Dogmatic Theology and social theory worked out in the era of Christendom (in Augustine and Aquinas, for example), Voegelin's intellectual enterprise has been one of response to Gnosticism (following in the footsteps of the original Christian theologian, St. Paul), for, as Voegelin put it in *The New Science of Politics* "the essence of modernity is the growth of Gnosticism" (p.126), a process that he understood to have developed particularly in the Celtic area of Western Christendom during the "Dark Ages".

CHAPTER 5
RAYMOND SOUSTER: COMPACT CANADIAN CHESTERTON?

I

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,

Ring in the common love of good.

Ring out old shapes of foul disease,
Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;
Ring out the thousand wars of old,
Ring in the thousand years of peace.

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
Ring in the Christ that is to be.

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ring Out, Wild Bells"
("In Memoriam CVI")

These are the last three stanzas of the eight-stanza "In Memoriam 106"of Victorian British national poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as they appeared in *Selections of Prose and Poetry* published by the Educational Book Company of Toronto in 1922, and reprinted by Gage and Company for later generations of Canadian schoolchildren. They typify the public patriotic ethos of post-Confederation-era Canada(Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" gave us our national denomination of"the True North", after all), which survived in one form or another until about 1960, and the aroma of which remains as the national characteristics of which Canadians are still proud (politeness, humility, fairness, bravery etc.), but are almost entirely unable to give realistic account of (ideologues have filled this vacuum with various self-flattering historical fantasies, of course). In short, the modern Canadian identity (as opposed to the ancient one of New France, and the intermediate one of British North America post-1812), is Victorian in origin and character,

indeed, even Tennysonian , as a study of the political thought of Canada's most representative and typical prime minister of the twentieth century, William Lyon Mackenzie King, will confirm (King apparently knew large sections of "In Memoriam", a book-length poetic sequence, by heart, and based his social and political thought largely on the theory of human nature expressed in the Romanticized Protestantism of Tennyson's Arthurian*Idylls*).

The recent apparent electoral collapse of the Liberal Party of Canada, which inherited the tradition to which we are referring, and the announcement by Prime Minister Harper, leader of the revitalized Conservative Party of Canada, in the context of a now-stumbling United States, of a great national celebrationin 2012 of the real Canadian founding in the defence of Canada against U.S. invasion during the War of 1812, should stimulate those who seek an alternative solution to the current problems of national purpose in Canada to look again at a "third way" of developing order in the social psyche of the country, that is represented historically by the "People's Culture " movement , and specifically the mostly marginalized or moribund "People's Poetry" part of that cultural configuration.

A good place to start in such an endeavour would be with the work of the poet of Toronto, Raymond Souster, who, in his life and writing,observed and reflected upon the gradual replacement in the twentieth century of a Tennysonian British persona of Canada with a Whitmanian American one, and who has undertaken a search, among the writers of the American "third way" of Populist poets, for allies in the necessary regrounding of People's Poetry in Canada. Naming as his chief assistants in this regard, "the three American Kenneths" (Fearing, Patchen, and, to a lesser degree,

Rexroth), Souster has succeeded in building a bridge from the greatest spokespeople for the nineteenth-century Canadian "People's Poetry" tradition (such as Bliss Carman and Archibald Lampman) via the British Georgian poets, to the twentieth century's chief exponents of the literary movement (e.g. Milton Acorn).

Tennysonian Toronto had, by the early twentieth century, begun to display the characteristics of dogmatic closure, and loss of significance of symbol, later exemplified by the suffocating parochial spirit described by sociologist Cyril Levitt as present in the, in many respects, truly "Toronto the Good" of Raymond Souster's 1930s youth there. Unfriendly visiting critics, such as occultist Aleister Crowley, thus found it easy to mark Toronto as a paradigm of Canadian stuffiness and backwardness, as he had done by 1906: "Toronto as a city carries out the idea of Canada as a country. It is a calculated crime both against the aspirations of the soul and the affections of the heart." Indeed, as Levitt chronicles in his *The Riot at Christie Pits*, by the 1930s, the spiritual dryness of the prevailing atmosphere of formalized faith had produced a social soil fertile for the growth of miniature local versions of the hostile new militant "political religions" (in Eric Voegelin's phrase) stalking Europe at this time, Marxism-Leninism and National Socialism (Nazism).

It was in this pre-World War II fading Tennysonian Toronto that Raymond Souster began to write, and publish in local newspapers, his early poems that were to become the basis for what he describes as "the new 'social' poetry" that he was trying to craft, and that was published in chap-books, anthologies, and full-sized books, beginning in 1944. Some of this early material appears in Souster's "first truly public volume" (as his bibliographer, Bruce Whiteman, calls it), the

Governor General's Award-winning *The Colour of the Times*, (1964), the dust cover of which featured the following meditation on Toronto, first published in 1947 (in *Go to Sleep, World*):

> Shake Hands with the Hangman
>
> From Casa Loma looking down—
> the City,
> shower of lights at a roadside carnival.
>
> It's cold in the streets, winter's coming.
> The white whip of winter waits
> to be swung with a crack
> in our stupid, grinning faces
>
> The man selling flowers outside Child's
> has the nervous, shifting eyes of the hunted.
> Shake hands with the hangman.
> Notice how steady those hands are
> After such bloody work.
>
> Shower of lights…
> white whip of winter…
> eyes of the hunted…
>
> Notice how steady those hands are
> thick with the blood of this city.

Souster had begun his lifelong employment career as a bank clerk in what could legitimately be called the "Toronto of Old" (in Henry Scadding's famous phrase), on September

1, 1939, for as the historian of the city, G.P. deT. Glazebrook points out, " A description of Toronto as it was in the generation before the second world war might still bear...(this title because)... large as it had become, the city had still much of the ancient character that was to be diluted and modified in postwar years." According to Souster's own memoir, *Getting On With It*, Souster had his "first 'serious' poem, 'Nocturnal'" published in the *Canadian Forum* issue of August, 1940, and it had been a few months earlier (during the winter of 1939-1940) after the Declaration of War, that he records that "I found myself writing dozens of poems in a new vein prompted by observing eye-opening, challenging life in the downtown streets during my lunch-breaks" from work at the bank. He also remarks that it was at this same time that he "discovered a great new American poet, Kenneth Fearing", whose work constituted a very important influence on Souster's own, according to both Souster biographer/bibliographer Bruce Whiteman and Souster scholar Harry Hugh Cook. Souster notes that his "greatest encouragement" occurred shortly after this, when the Providence, Rhode Island, *Sunday Journal* published his poems "Report From Canada" in its June 1, 1941 issue, and "Twentieth Century" in its October 26, 1941 number (the latter being reprinted by the New York *Herald-Tribune*, November 2, 1941). Several other items by Souster appeared in the *Sunday Journal* through the kindness, as Souster acknowledges, of Winfield Townley Scott, literary editor of the *Journal,* and Carl Sandburg scholar, in 1941 and 1942, including his critical piece "Report from Canadian Literary Front Line", which was published in the *Journal*'s issue of August 23, 1942. As Whiteman shows, Souster was corresponding with Scott about his poetry, and his early

efforts at writing prose fiction, earlier in that year, after Souster had enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force (on November 11,1941), and been posted to Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Souster's affinity for contemporary American poetry, and for the work of Kenneth Fearing in particular, thus preceded his direct encounter with the Montreal School of Poets (and particularly the *First Statement* subset of this group) through his RCAF colleague William Goldberg (later Goodwin), a nephew of Irving Layton, in June 1942, when Souster visited Montreal on leave. Prior to the arrival of Goldberg at the Sydney base earlier that month, Souster had had (as he describes it) "plenty of time...to work at and read poetry in quiet surroundings", so that he was "sending out more manuscripts than ever, many to little magazines in the U.S.A." So Souster was evidently very productive before his association with John Sutherland and the *First Statement* circle (which included Layton, Louis Dudek and other younger poets), where he found an intellectual home (they favoured an undogmatic socialism, and American poetic mentors, such as Carl Sandburg, Kenneth Fearing, Hart Crane, Robert Frost and Whitman), and a publisher for his first full book (*When We Are Young*, First Statement Press, 1946). The more prominent (and older) members of the Montreal Group (such as F.R. Scott, P.K. Page, A.M. Klein etc.), clustered around the McGill University-based *Preview* magazine edited by British expatriate Patrick Anderson, which espoused a rather shrill socialist line, and advocated British poetic models (Auden, Spender, Eliot etc.).

Through omission, both friends and foes of Souster's work have de-emphasized the poet's first formative period in Toronto and the RCAF (from September,1939 to summer, 1942), before his meeting with the *First Statement* poets, in

their accounts of the genesis and development of his poetry.Thus, they have missed, in my view, understanding its core nature as a successful reformulation of the traces of the Tennysonian ethos in Canada in terms of the American Populist poetic tradition to reflect the new Toronto and Canada that emerged during World War II, and that unfolded in the following fifteen years.

Bibliographer/biographer Whiteman, for example, confines his notice of the period 1939 to 1942 to some biographical details of the poet's early adulthood, and the general statement that "the war years were vital to Souster", referring to the obvious geographical and military service setting of many of his early poems, and the enduring focus on the Toronto neighbourhoods in which he developed, and the issues raised by war, in his later prose and poetry. Scholar Cook, on the other hand, who seeks in his unpublished 1968 M.A. thesis to illustrate growth and development in the Souster corpus, does a fine job of demonstrating the clear influence of (consecutively) Fearing, Patchen, William Carlos Williams and others on Souster's work, and of outlining (in Souster's own words) the poet's strengthening poetic purpose for Canadian poetry, but offers no account of the possible intellectual or spiritual matrix from which such a novel perspective (in Canadian letters) as Souster's could have sprung. Robin Mathews, in his 1976 preface to Keith Richardson's *Poetry and the Colonized Mind*: *Tish*, caricatures Souster as a poet "who began as a part of the Montreal school of poetry", but who "became a strong advocate of and propagandizer for U.S. influence", eventually producing, in " his notes preceding a selection of his poems in *Cerberus* (1952)" a number of comments that "constitute a prelude to *Tish* politics and poetics." This hostile analysis,

of course, in addition to ignoring Souster's pre-Montreal Group poetic development, also neglects to mention that the *First Statement* circle of the Montreal Group with which Souster became associated, took, as we have noted, American rather than British poets as mentors, and it (in Hegelian fashion) reads back Souster's later friendship and dialogue with members (such as Cid Corman) of the American Black Mountain School of Poetry, which inspired the Canadian Tish School, (considered by Mathews to be American imperialist in intention), into the vacuum at the beginning of Mathews' account of Souster's development, making Souster, in this circular exercise in philosophical sorcery, into a conscious or unconscious "propagandizer" for American imperialism from the first.

In personal interviews with the present author, Souster has stated clearly that his attraction to certain American poets in his early years of writing in the 1940s arose from the things they wrote about, and the way in which they wrote about them, characteristics which chimed with Souster's own experiences and the way in which he wanted to describe them. The choice of these mentors, as Souster explains it, was simply a matter of their availability; as he puts it , "no contemporary Canadian poets were writing like this." From these remarks, the logical deduction would seem to be that the muse most pertinent to the troubadour of the everyday Toronto of the 1940s and 50s was the one inspiring the "three (American) Kenneths", then all still alive and publishing. Souster has described Kenneth Fearing in his memoir as "a great new American poet", but when Souster discovered Fearing in 1939-40, the latter had been publishing poetry for over ten years, and his work was well known to many American readers, especially among those circles described

by David Herreshoff (in his *The Origins of American Marxism: From the Transcendentalists to De Leon)* as "the Americanizers of Marx". More broadly, Fearing, born in Oak Park, Illinois (suburban Chicago) in 1902, and who lived in New York, was a figure primarily of the first half of the twentieth century, his first book of poetry *Angel Arms* (1929) being described by Robert Polito as having "one of the iconic modernist debuts of the American 1920s".

As an urban American writer who came of age in the late 1920s, Fearing was part of the era in American letters that Roderick Nash has described as "the nervous generation" (in contradistinction to the small minority of Bohemians, proto-existentialists and Surrealists of the period, who have falsely caused the term "lost generation" to be attached to the literary, artistic, and general intellectual culture of the United States in the years 1917-1930). Analyzing a wide spectrum of the American thought of the time, Nash concludes that the predominant social ethos was "nervousness"- nervousness about the negative effects of World War I upon the nineteenth-century confidence in human goodness and perfectibility (and thus in the "American Dream"), nervousness about the rapid urbanization and industrialization of America, and nervousness about the challenge to the old American verities posed by the new psychological and sociological movements entering American thought from Europe. However, Nash also finds that this nervousness does not become full anxiety among the writers and artists whose thought he surveys, for all of them, he claims, even those often understood as radical skeptics, (such as Eugene O'Neill and F. Scott Fitzgerald), retain an ethical intention, based upon a belief in American critical common sense and know-how, precisely the cast of mind discovered by

visitingGerman-Austrian political scientist Eric Voegelin in America in the 1920s, and analyzed by him at the time in his *On the Form of the American Mind.*

If the American "nervous generation" in arts and letters came on the scene in the 1920s, produced by multiple challenges to the founding faith of the United States and its Revolution, a corresponding crisis did not occur in the context of what might be called the Canadian Evolution until the 1940s. For it was then, as Canadian historian Jack Granatstein and his colleagues (in their *Nation: Canada Since Confederation*) have told us, that a "continental shift" occurred in the Canadian polity, linking it with a non-European imperium, or imperial sphere of influence, the United States. Granatstein et al. pinpoint the time of this tectonic realignment of the Canadian body politic with some precision :

"...the crisis of the summer of 1940 forced Canada to look to its own security. What if Britain fell? What of Canada's defences? What of Canada's trade? Those hard questions were also being posed in Washington by President Roosevelt and his brain trust, and the answers in both countries seemed to demand closer co-operation between them. There had been some movement in this direction even before the war, for Roosevelt and (William Lyon Mackenzie) King were friendly, their governments had worked together to negotiate two trade agreements in 1935 and 1938, and there had been some tentative military staff talks in 1938. Now something more was needed, and in August Roosevelt called the prime minister on the telephone to suggest that the two leaders meet at Ogdensburg, New York. There they agreed to establish a Permanent Joint Board of Defence to plan for the defence of the continent and to co-ordinate the deployment of their

forces. It was a historic decision (made, interestingly, without any consultation whatever with Parliament or Congress) and one, in retrospect, that marked Canada's shift from the British to the American sphere of interest..." (p. 379)

American cultural, economic, and political influence had been increasing throughout the King era from the 1920s on, of course, but this process was greatly accelerated by Canada's close alliance with the United States during World War II. While the political maneuvres and long-range implications of the events of 1940 would have been unclear to Souster in Toronto in this period before his enlistment, the facts and speculations about the Battle of Britain, and the expected imminent German invasion of the British Isles, were daily fodder for the radio and print media news, as were the details of Canada's switch to full war production in early 1940, under the new Department of Munitions and Supply headed by American Clarence Decatur Howe (C.D. Howe). Conditions in Toronto itself at the time were (for North America) fairly harsh, as civic historian Glazebrook outlines:

"The second world war was a grim, businesslike affair for those abroad or at home. A regime of moderate austerity was imposed through taxation, rationing, and control of prices and rents. Some food items like tea, butter, and meat were strictly rationed. Shortage of electricity because of the demands of industry blacked out houses for some hours each day, and the citizens scrambled in attics or summer cottages for half-forgotten oil lamps. Streets had a strange appearance with candles flickering in the windows of each house. New cars were unprocurable and so were tires for old ones. Gasoline was so narrowly limited that bicycles had a new vogue. Some of the large shops brought back into service horse-drawn delivery wagons. The number of passengers in street cars and

buses rose from 154 millions in 1939 to 303 millions in 1945." (p. 234)

Souster scholar Harry Hugh Cook identifies two major periods in the poet's work, the first, that of the Second World War era, (written in the milieu of the *First Statement* social critics, and under the influence of Kenneth Fearing), and the second, beginning after his demobilization in 1945 and return to Toronto, when his work began several stages of development in the direction of a more personalist, lyric, and affective writing, beginning under the influence of the poetry of Kenneth Patchen, and then incorporating aspects of the style and content of the work of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and other American poets whom he discovered through his friendship with the Montreal poet and academic Louis Dudek, and in many cases, with whom he corresponded, and, in some instances, brought to Toronto. Cook's closely-argued literary analysis seems highly plausible, on textual grounds alone. However, something essential to Souster and his work is missing in this rather formalistic approach, I believe, which causes Cook to fail to link Souster to the strand in American poetics with which he himself expresses an affinity (the Populists, especially Fearing, Patchen and Rexroth), and to fail to see Souster as the chief Canadian exponent-indeed, perhaps, inventor- of the Canadian version of this School: what has come to be known as "People's Poetry".

Souster stumbled across Kenneth Fearing's work in the winter of 1939/40 on one of his lunch-breaks from the bank where he worked, when he purchased for 50 cents (from a "reject" tabie in the old Eaton's downtown department store in Toronto) a copy of the American poet's 1938 collection *Dead Reckoning and Other Poems*, his third volume of verse.

Harry Hugh Cook observes in his dissertation on Souster's poetry that "during the war, Souster had been reading much of Kenneth Fearing's poetry, and many parallels, both in form and content, can be seen in these two poets' work." Cook chooses Fearing's "Andy and Jerry and Joe" and Souster's "Yonge Street Saturday Night" to illustrate these points of comparison, and concludes that "both poems treat the boredom and meaninglessness of the war period; both poems use line for the same purpose, each line containing one idea; both poems use repetitious openings, Fearing with the word 'we', and Souster with the words 'walking' and 'something'." Cook further notes that "besides the subject of war, there are many other Fearing influences in Souster's work. Both poets feel the same sympathy for the common, downtrodden man who is trapped by society and whose individual freedom is violated."

While I am not qualified to judge whether the textual similarities that Cook adduces are supportable from a literary point of view, they certainly seem to be there. However, from the perspective of this essay, the original dates of publication of the two poems are of particular interest, Fearing's "Andy and Jerry are Joe" appearing in that poet's first collection, *Angel Arms* (1929), and Souster's "Yonge Street Saturday Night" in his *The Colour of the Times* (1964). Cook footnotes his quotation from "Andy and Jerry and Joe" with a reference to Fearing's *New and Selected Poems*, (1956), which contains the poem, and it is certainly possible that Souster read it there; however, it is hard to see how both writers are describing "the boredom and meaninglessness of the war period", and there are no obvious reasons to think that either of them are. From a social-historical point of view, the similarity in content (and perhaps even in form) between the two poems suggests a

parallel (or parallels) between the spiritual content of American urban culture of the "nervous generation" of the 1920s that we have discussed above, and its Canadian counterpart of the 1940s. The American "nervousness" was largely "cured" by the following decades of economic crisis, world war, and assumption of imperium, it may be argued, but the passing of the older culture of Canada, most obvious of all in the Toronto of the 1950s, according to Canadian philosopher, George Grant, has continued apace over the decades, so that Toronto today may be with some justification classed as a regional American city (in terms of socio-cultural geography).

It was also during World War II that Souster encountered the poetry of Kenneth Patchen, with whom he eventually corresponded, and a copy of whose "magnificent *First Will and Testament*" he had received "among the books" he had "begun to order from the Gotham Book Mart in New York City", as Souster puts it in his memoir. This activity occurred in 1942 and 1943, while Souster was stationed at RCAF, Sydney, Nova Scotia, from which the first number of the literary magazine *Direction*, put together by Souster, Goldberg, and other air force colleagues, was published. As Souster notes concerning Patchen in his memoir, "In answer to my request, he sent two short poems from California for our first issue", and goes on to remark that by this time "Patchen had become my god of the American poetry world," and that "the two Kenneths, Fearing and Patchen...would continue to be my twin poetry idols until the sixties."

Acknowledging that "the two Kenneths" were "both so completely different poets", Souster nevertheless found in the work of each something that resonated with aspects of his own experience as man and writer. Patchen's first book of

poetry, *Before the Brave* had appeared in 1936, and he, like the decade older Fearing, had been born in the Midwestern heartland of American Populist poetry (in his case, Ohio). Also like Fearing, Patchen was educated at the University of Wisconsin (Alexander Meiklejohn Experimental College), the Social Science Faculty of which had provided the intellectual impetus for the reformist "Wisconsin Idea" of Robert M. La Follette and Robert M. LaFollette's Jr.'s Progressive Party of the 1920s, '30s and early '40s, perhaps the major "third force" movement of U.S. political history. Both poets were also urban writers in close touch with the American liberal opinion forming classes of their day, although both also maintained a certain distance from (and, indeed, dislike for) aspects of contemporary liberal American thought. Indeed, like their poetic successor Kenneth Rexroth, Fearing and Patchen strike the reader as both conservative of traditional American trust in common sense and human goodness and purpose, and radically aware (in their choice of poetic themes and forms) of the challenge to these beliefs posed by the impact of modernity.

In conversations with the present writer, Sousterexpressed his dislike for the turn, which became evident in the later work of both Fearing and Patchen, to surreal modes of expression and interest in the occult. As James Deahl shows in his introduction to Souster's recent collection of new poems, *Big Smoke Blues*, the poetmaintained an allegiance to the Common Sense tradition of the American Populist movement of the early twentieth century, with its non-ideological social realism, and the faith and social gospel of Canadian United Church Protestant Christianity, throughout his career. Indeed it could be argued that Souster had performed a feat in the poetic field in Canada similar to that

accomplished by the founders of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in the political arena; i.e., of recasting the Victorian (Tennysonian), and earlier Loyalist-based ethos of English-speaking largely-rural Canada in terms of the new social democratic realities of an Americanized urban industrial country, a task anticipated by Souster's favourite Confederation poet, Archibald Lampman.

The mention of Souster's critique of surrealism and occultism in the later work of Fearing and Patchen introduces the function of the final Kenneth- Rexroth- in the Sousterian pantheon of American poetic predecessors. On Souster's own account, Rexroth's writing was much less formative for his work and the influence, such as it is, was derived from Souster's friendship with the more academic Montreal poet, Louis Dudek.

Rexroth himself was the (largely self-taught) intellectual *par excellence* of the American Populist poetic tradition (he was born in 1905 in South Bend, Indiana). As Sam Hamill and Elaine Laura Kleiner put it, Rexroth was "by turns revolutionary and conservative, simultaneously spiritual and worldly, Asian and Western." A brilliant scholar and critic, as well as a poet of the first rank, Rexroth offered many perceptive psychological and philosophical comments upon cultural matters, particularly involving comparative studies of ancient and modern and Eastern and Western modes of thought. In his introduction to a new edition of G.R.S. Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten,* a compendium of ancient Gnostic texts, for example, Rexroth wrote:

" I have dwelt at length on the origins of the mythological and ritual material of Gnosticism for the simple reason that Gnosticism is the main funnel through which these rites and doctrines reach modern times. The mysterious deity of the

Templars or the erotic revels of the witches or the ceremonies of the Masons or Rosicrucians, all are aspects of a special heterodoxy that began with Gnosticism. For better or worse, the Gnostics were the founders of what we call Occultism.

. . . What the Gnostics projected onto the screen of their profound ignorance as a picture of the universe was in reality a picture of their own minds. Its mythology is a symbolic portrayal, almost a deliberate one, of the forces which operate in the structuring and evolution of the human personality. It is, more than almost any other religious system, because it is of all others, the most invented, the most 'made up', an institutionallized panorama of what (Carl) Jung has called the Collective Unconscious. The whole Gnostic heresy is a sort of socially therapeutic dream. (This notion, as Jung has pointed out, does not involve any mysterious undersoul shared by all men- it is a collective picture because all men respond to life in much the same way, because they all have the same physiological endowment).

We can operate upon our minds by the manipulation of symbols if not of the cosmos. Gnosticism was fundamentally a magical theory of life, man, the universe, God, morality. . . We can learn nothing about the solar system from Gnosticism and little about good and evil in the world, but we can learn considerable about ourselves."

I am familiar with the technical literature on Gnosticism, both in its ancient and modern cultic forms, and in its modern ideological manifestations. The foregoing excerpts from Rexroth's introduction to Mead's book (republished in his collection of papers *Assays* in 1961), amount to a *tour de force* summary of the state of science concerning Gnosticism at mid-twentieth century. Since Rexroth wrote, there has been considerable scholarly advance in the understanding of the

Gnostic phenomenon, particularly in the area of the recrudescence of Gnostic thought-ways in modernity as the basis for the nineteenth-century ideological consciousness, which determines the language of much of the social, cultural and political debate of today. One thinks of Nadia Choucha's *Surrealism and the Occult*, J.M. Roberts' *The Mythology of the Secret Societies*, or Cyril O'Regan's *Gnostic Return in Modernity*, as well as many other important monographs published in recent decades, that illustrate the point made by Eric Voegelin in his *The New Science of Politics* in 1952, (that now seems merely a truism), that "modernity is the growth of gnosticism", and that was clearly grasped in essence by Rexroth, the Populist philosopher, around the same time.

Like Rexroth in the United States, Souster in Canada was a participant observer with regard to the cultural and political movements of his own time and place-a sort of natural sociologist. In Souster's case, as poet of Toronto, his perspective was perhaps similar to the "natural area" school of sociology and urban geography of Robert E. Park and his followers at the University of Chicago from the 1920s to the 1950s, which emphasized the "human ecology" of neighbourhoods, cities and nations over time, and analyzed societies in terms of both their equally-important material and spiritual interrelationships, a kind of compact Aristotelian approach. The detached involvement required for the success of this method makes one neither a reactionary nor a radical, but a moderate modern. As Souster describes the process he is both a part of and reports on in his 2010 volume *Big Smoke Blues*:

Making a City

could be a little like
working away
on those jigsaw puzzles
back in the thirties,
Which had us
scratching our heads
most of the time.

We had to wait
Until we'd fitted
all the pieces together,
and then at last
the picture was revealed
in all its detail
and buried colours.

II

In his famous Walgreen Lectures on "Truth and Representation" given at the University of Chicago in the winter of 1951, German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin noted both that "the essence of modernity" can be recognized as "the growth of gnosticism", and that "modernity is a growth within Western society, in competition with the Mediterranean tradition", by which he meant Greek philosophy, Judaism and Christianity. In the conclusion of these lectures, and in his voluminous writings over the next three and a half decades, Voegelin detailed what he considered to be the practical implications of this analysis for contemporary leaders of thought in the present globalized civilization; i.e., that they needed to encourage the element in

their cultures derived from, or compatible with, "the Mediterranean tradition", and discourage those with affinities with "gnosticism", that is "modernity". Clearly, for Voegelin, the dominant cultural and social situation of the modern world (in the temporal sense) involved a complex mixture of "Mediterranean" and "Gnostic" tendencies of thought and custom, the task of the practitioner it was to sort out.

Raymond Souster, the "last of the Great Generation" (as James Deahl has called him) of Canadian poets, died on October 19, 2012 at the age of 91. As a leading exponent of the modernist revolution in Canadian poetry and poetics of the twentieth century, Souster had continued to write in the spare realistic poetic style that he had perfected throughout his life until very shortly before his passing, but as intimate friends had realized, the spiritual subtext of his work had become increasingly obvious during his latter years, as mounting health problems (he eventually went blind) assailed himself and his beloved wife, Rosalia. In private conversations I had with him over a number of years, he revealed his chief abiding poetic inspirations (literarily speaking) to have been (perhaps surprisingly) Rainer Maria Rilke, Edward Thomas, Robinson Jeffers, and Harvey Shapiro.

While, at first glance, an odd collection of poetic mentors in terms of their style of writing, topics of concern, and cultural origins, this does, in fact, represent the amplitude of structures of consciousness of an apocalyptic-gnostic nature present in Renaissance writing in company there with the "Mediterranean" tradition identified by Voegelin. In fact, Rilke, Thomas, Jeffers and Shapiro, taken together, exemplify the Hellenic Gnostic, Hermetic and Kabbalistic modes of thought found, in tension with Classic and Christian

perceptions, in the Renaissance world-view, albeit expressed in the forms of German and Russian spirituality, Romanticism, Calvinism and American Populism, respectively. Although only the last element is obvious in Souster's poetry throughout his career, all the other factors are subtly alluded to, especially in the work of his last quarter century. Thus, he was a sort of "compact Chesterton", or "Chesterton manqué", as his early mentor and friend John Sutherland may have believed.

It was Sutherland's *First Statement* circle, it will be recalled, that provided the first Canadian home for Souster's poetic vision, and he flourished in this milieu, his first full chapbook, *When We Are Young*, being published by Sutherland's First Statement Press in February-March, 1946 (as #4 in its "New Writers Series"). Sutherland had advertised the book in the first issue of his new magazine, *Northern Review* (an amalgamation of *First Statement* and its rival *Preview*), in January 1946 (1.1 December-January 1945-1946). Bruce Whiteman considers Sutherland to have been "an early champion of Souster's work", noting that in his introduction to the anthology *Other Canadians* (1949), Sutherland wrote of *When We Are Young* as being "of special interest ", and that the book was still advertised in the June-July, 1953 edition of the journal. However, as Whiteman also points out, by this time Sutherland had become a critic of Souster's work, writing in a letter (of March 12, 1952) to Alan Crawley: "I believe that [Souster] has proven himself incapable of developing beyond the stage of juvenile exuberance, and I can see only a trace or two of poetry and no poem of any value in his latest book (*City Hall Street*)."

The tone of Sutherland's remark here is disappointment, and it may well be asked, particularly in view of Sutherland's

early death, and Souster's great longevity, and huge poetic production, whether the former's censure would have been sustained over time, and, more fundamentally, what development in Souster Sutherland had hoped to see.

Sutherland's essay in the *Northern Review* of October-November, 1953 (vol.6, no.4), "The Great Equestrians", I think provides the clue to a successful addressing of these questions.

This piece, written three years before his death, and a year prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, is (with other items like "Preface to W.W.E. Ross") where Sutherland's "literary conservativism emerged most fully", according to the editor of the posthumously-published collection of his work, Miriam Waddington. Waddington thinks that "'the Equestrians' (*sic*) is an eccentric piece of writing, uneven and full of confusion, yet containing typical Sutherlandian elements of wit, irony and poetic inventiveness." Furthermore, Waddington believes that "Sutherland became a Catholic when Canadian literature failed him as a source of belief", although she notes that "his interest in Christian thought" had begun "to awaken several years before his actual conversion took place", a situation reflected in his writing as early as his essay "The Past Decade in Canadian Poetry" (*Northern Review*, Dec.1950-Jan, 1951), in which he expressed the "disappointment of his early hopes in Canadian literature", and where "he prophesied a religious revival for Canadian poetry."

Sutherland's "Great Equestrians" are G.K. Chesterton, D.H. Lawrence, Roy Campbell, and C.S. Lewis, "respectively the White Horse of Wessex, the Laughing Horse, the Talking Bronco, and the Lizard-Horse, in the order of their chosen equine rank", as Sutherland puts it, admitting that "of course,

in the strict sense of the phrase, they do not form a literary school; at a casual glance they even seem to be hideously ill-matched." Certainly, as Waddington's remarks suggest, these are not all Roman Catholic poets, or even all Christian poets (in the theological sense), although all might be said to employ Christian imagery (in different ways, and to different ends, as Waddington's critique correctly implies) .

However, as is clear from the context of Sutherland's above introductory remarks, he thinks that the link between these poets is deeper than confessional or ideological, as his following assertions indicate:

"But their spiritual bonds are undeniable. Alone among the writers of our century, they have displayed a mastery of the ramifications of equine symbolism. I would contend that that amounts to saying that they are the sole modern masters of the imagination. It is by no means insignificant that the imagination has been symbolized for centuries by the figure of a winged horse; and it is no mere accident that the winged horse has been excluded from our modern literary salons and never mentioned except in a whisper. Pegasus has fallen into disrepute; only the Equestrians have cherished him and only the Equestrians can restore his power of flight.

There are four supreme qualities symbolized by the horse with wings. All four are present to some degree in the writings of all four Equestrians; but I shall discuss each quality in turn in relation to the writer who gives it its most distinctive expression. I hope in this way to illustrate the difference between the true spirit of literature and its black abuse in the first decades of our century." (John Sutherland, "The Great Equestrians" in Miriam Waddington (ed.), *Essays, Contro-versies and Poems*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972p. 77)

Sutherland'spoint here is surely that Chesterton, Lawrence, Campbell and Lewis, pre-eminently, and perhaps exclusively among the moderns, understand and embody in their work the "true spirit of literature" (as it is derived from the imagination), rather than an orthodox theology or correct ideological attitudes, a spirit which he believes twentieth-century poets have largely lost or not even discovered (naming Joyce and Pound at the outset of the essay as fathers of the type of writing that is "obviously on the verge of complete extinction."). (p.76) It is certainly not "eccentric" (in Waddington's phrase) to cast such an argument in terms of the revitalization of Pegasus, whose modern association with the Muses and poetry reverts to the Classical tale of the winged horse's hoof-stroke causing the spring Hippocrene to well forth on Mount Helicon, the winged horse becoming thus the favourite of the Muses. During the Renaissance, as Edgar Wind notes, Pegasus was revived as a symbol of the Holy Ghost, substituting for the dove in a woodcut of German humanist Conrad Celtis in 1507, for example. So, Sutherland's "equestrian" figure seems appropriate indeed for his poetic revitalizers of the spiritually complex (and in some respects contradictory) Renaissance ethos that preceded the flat (in Sutherland's view) landscape of Modernist verse.

The "great equestrians" of Sutherland's essay carry each primarily one aspect of the power of the Pegasides (the name among the ancient Greek poets for the Muses), the White Horse of Wessex (Chesterton) standing for "*the sense of wonder*", the Laughing Horse (Lawrence) standing for " *the spirit of laughter*", the Talking Bronco (Campbell) representing " the much-abused but important principle of*freedom of action*", and the Lizard-Horse embodying the quality of "*the power of conscience*" (*ibid.* pp. 77-82; italics

in original). Chief among these powers, and the one that characterizes all the "great equestrians" in Sutherland's opinion is the first, "the sense of wonder", a point he makes early in the essay, after quoting a passage of Chesterton's prose. Here he states his main thesis:

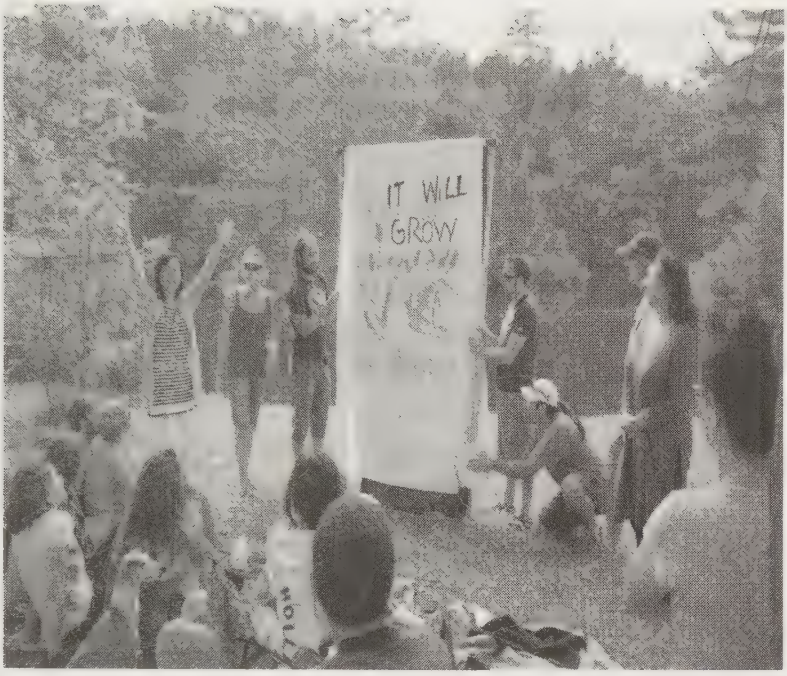
"The spirit of this passage is the spirit of the Equestrian School as a whole. And that exuberant statement near its conclusion- 'we might almost say that the handsomest compliment to a man is to call him a horse'-is one to which all the members would subscribe. 'I would rather be a horse than a man': that is the motto of the Great Equestrians, and when it is understood aright we are on the way to understanding the meaning of their movement. It is the belief of the Equestrians that we cease to be human when we fail of this equine faculty. For it is surely the capacity to wonder, and to communicate wonder, that makes us human creatures. When we make the mind a mirror, as the White Horse was fond of saying, then we are human. To be non-equine is to be non-human: we then reverse the whole procedure, and, as the moderns have been doing for a generation, proceed to make the mirror a mind. The mentalizing of the mirror is a cumulative process; it has gone on in seemingly endless fashion in literally thousands of poems through which the light of the mirror shines like the intelligence of the sun divinity, symbol of our divorced condition and of our brazen claim to godhead in spite of God. And of course the mentalizing of the mirror is the atomizing and destruction of the mind. The mind shatters into a thousand pieces at one touch from that flashing ascendency, the demon in the glass." (*ibid.*, p. 78)

The Chestertonian "sense of wonder" (expressed in the "exuberant" admiration for "equine" being) is here shown to

be the basis for Sutherland's category of "great equestrians", and it will be recalled that his disappointment in Souster's work (expressed in his letter to Alan Crawley in 1952) lay in the former's failure to (in Sutherland's estimation) develop "beyond the stage of juvenile exuberance", strongly suggesting that he had thought that such a maturing had been possible. Sutherland, of course, did not live to see Souster's deep engagement with the writing of poets beyond the scope of the American Populism with which he began, such as Kenneth Rexroth, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Lowell, Rainer Maria Rilke and William Carlos Williams, or with his renewed later appreciation of very early influences, such as the Georgians Edward Thomas and W.W. Gibson, or the Canadian Confederation poets, particularly Archibald Lampman. Also, among friends and colleagues of a later generation of Canadian poets, legatees of Sutherland's other "great equestrians" emerged, Al Purdy arguably fulfilling the role of local "Laughing Horse" (Lawrence), Milton Acorn of argumentative Anglican "Lizard Horse" (Lewis), and various Canadian Nationalist poets (or poets in their Nationalist character) serving the function of Sutherlandian "Talking Bronco" (Campbell).

But, at the centre of this constellation of Pegasus in modern Canada was Raymond Souster, Canada's Chesterton or "White Horse of Wessex", necessarily "compact" (in Voegelinian terminology), rather than "articulated", because of the historical colonial (French, British and now American) status of Canada on the world scene, and the "compact" (undeveloped) nature of Souster's preferred and always dominant Populist style itself. Like Chesterton, beginning with the poetry of the New World (in Chesterton's case, Whitman), and eschewing both the theosophical pseudo-

religions and their parallel ideological movements, Souster recovered imaginatively the spirit of the composite Renaissance reality in which Canada was born.



EPILOGUE

The focus of the succession of largely friendship-based "controversies of poets'' and People's Poetry festivals and publications that followed the demise of the Canadian People's Poetry Movement in 2003-2004 was fast fading by winter 2013, as differences in philosophical perspective emerged around the management of the Purdy Country Literary Festival (PurdyFest), the digestion of the Souster legacy, and the Cuban and Chinese cultural links, by the remaining followers of the form.

As suggested by the foregoing pages, however, the decade since the initial "controversy of poets" in Hamilton, Ontario,

had revealed among the poetic disciples of Milton Acorn and the other founders of People's Poetry in modern Canada, the Renaissance roots of their vision, with its complex and often contradictory character. This revelation, in turn, connected the People's Poetry enterprise with the broader issue in philosophical anthropology of the beginnings of civilizational self-reflection canvassed by such great modern thinkers as Karl Jaspers (with his "axis time" concept of the genesis of Buddhist, Confucian/Taoist, Zoroastrian/ Hebraic/Hellenic/ Christian thought), and the "Ecumenic Age" notion of Eric Voegelin, with its Gnostic, Christian, and Neo-Platonic answers to the problems of social and spiritual disorder .

Thus, it was not surprising that, in the context of the Canadian cultural "mosaic", in its ideologically-influenced, "multicultural" phase, poets emerged in the wake of People's Poetry's disintegration whose work reverted more directly to the historical sources of social reflection than had been the case in the past. The Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zi) School–Taoism of James Deahl, and the Shamanism-Zen Buddhism of Chris Faiers, for example, became more overt, as did the Marti-influenced thought of Katharine Beeman, and the pantheism of Kent Bowman. These, along with newcomers to the People's Poetry "scene" such as Greek Cypriot-Canadian Paulos Ioannou, returned contemporary social and political problems to the most relevant of eras in cultural history for their understanding, the "Ecumenic Age" of the Classical world explored philosophically by Voegelin. Following the lead of the brilliant modern Cretan populist poet and novelist Nikos Kazantzakis, who, in effect, recreated the experiences of the "Ecumenic Age" soul assailed by the meaninglessness engendered by the violent depradations of the "ecumenic empires", and by the competitive routes to salvation offered

by Gnosis, Christianity and Neo-Platonism, Ioannou convincingly conceptualizes the malaise of the modern (particularly American) imperium, as felt by the people who are its parallel pawns (Cypriots and Canadians, for example).

Kazantzakis was a scholar of the thought of French Vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson, whose meditations he "tested" in the context of the Buddhist, Marxist-Leninist, Nietzschean and New Testament Christian modes of thought as he understood them, finally settling upon a Neo-Hellenic Vitalism of his own. Interestingly, Voegelin can be said to have begun (as an actually original philosopher) with Bergson, following the French thinker's insights back to their source in F.W.J. von Schelling's Romanticism, and from thence to the German and English Christian mystics of the High Middle Ages, and to their roots in the Pseudo-Dionysius and Plotinus of the Classical world.

Bergson himself became increasingly sympathetic towards Roman Catholicism in the last part of his life, the period during which he wrote *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. It was this book that particularly influenced Voegelin, and in it Bergson moves from his earlier "nature religion" (as C.S. Lewis called it) to an intellectual mysticism connecting with the analyses of consciousness of the Greek "mystic philosophers" (in Voegelin's phrase) Plato and the Platonists, and the Christian philosophy flowing from their work.

In the realm of popular cultural criticism and populist poetry, the English writer G.K. Chesterton followed a similar philosophical trajectory to that of his academic contemporary, Bergson. Initially drawing on the concatenation of Occult, Unitarian, Theosophical, Feminist, Socialist, and Neo-Romantic intellectual movements of his native Late Victorian

London, he gradually moved through an enthusiasm for Whitman via the English Romantic Schellingian Samuel Taylor Coleridge to a robust Anglo-Catholic Christianity, and from thence in combat with the Neo-Platonist Dean William R. Inge and various Anglican and Roman Catholic Modernists, to a full-blooded Thomistic Roman Catholicism, with its debt to the mystic Pseudo-Dionysius.

As scholars have noted, Chesterton's social, political, critical and poetical positions are clearly present in the work of his "pre-Roman Catholic" period, so that his role as *eminence grise* of the English Georgian Poets, dating from the period of his early publications in the Edwardian Era, suggests the relevance of his work for an understanding of the Georgians and their legatees, such as the Canadian People's Poets.

In short, Chesterton recovered the Renaissance problematic, and this achievement was passed on to People's Poets, most notably Milton Acorn. The great Londoner enucleated his accomplishment in this 1905 poem:

Ultimate

The vision of a haloed host
That weep around an empty throne;
And, aureoles dark and angels dead,
Man with his own life stands alone.

'I am,' he says his bankrupt creed;
'I am,' and is again a clod:
The sparrow starts, the grasses stir,
For he has said the name of God.

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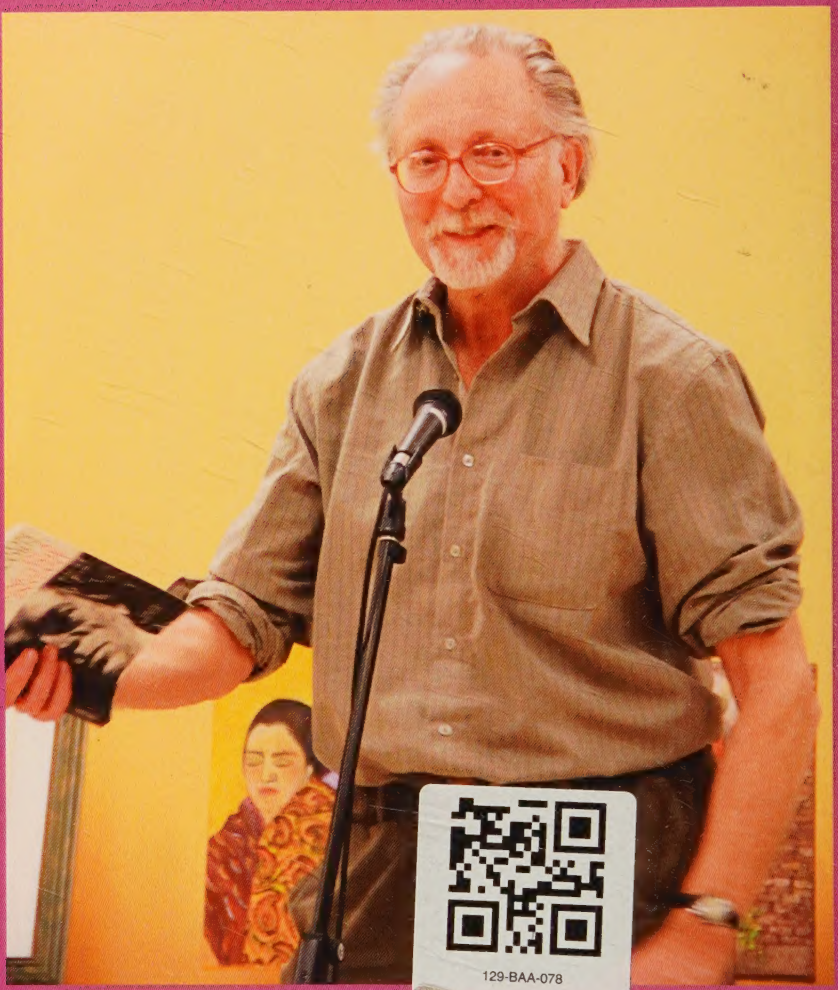

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Once again Terry Barker has put all those who are intrigued by the uniqueness and significance of Canadian culture in his debt. This collection of essays on People's Poetry goes well beyond the conventional territory of literary criticism to produce a fascinating set of perspectives on the nature of Canadian identity refracted through the writings of G.K.Chesterton and Eric Voegelin, amongst others. It offers a case study of the cultural crisis of the 'gnostic' culture of late modernity.

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